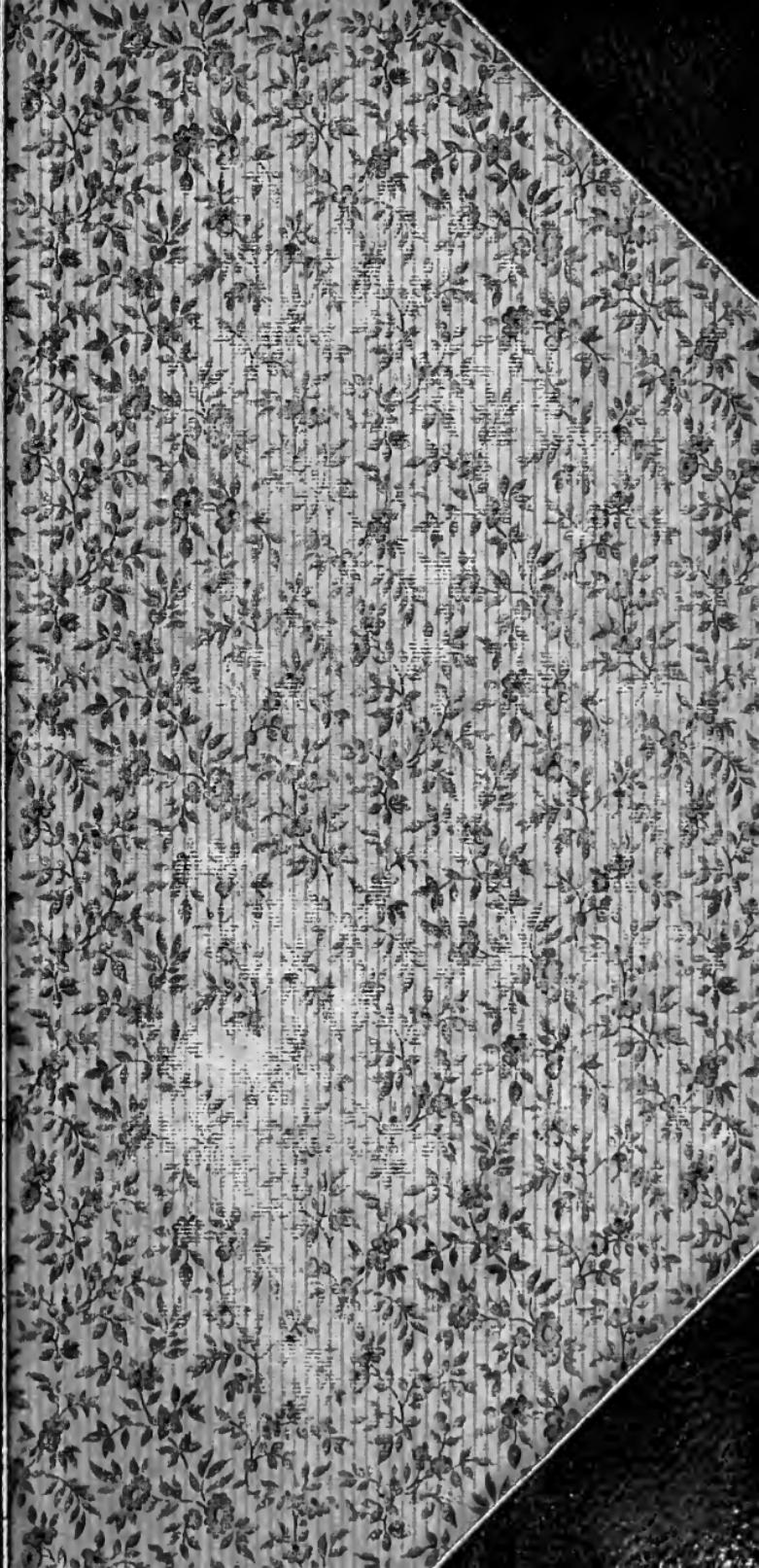


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THE REPENTANCE
OF
PAUL WENTWORTH.

A Novel.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.



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Publishers in Ordinary to Her Majesty the Queen.

1889.

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I DEDICATE THIS STORY

TO

SIR MORELL MACKENZIE, M.D.,

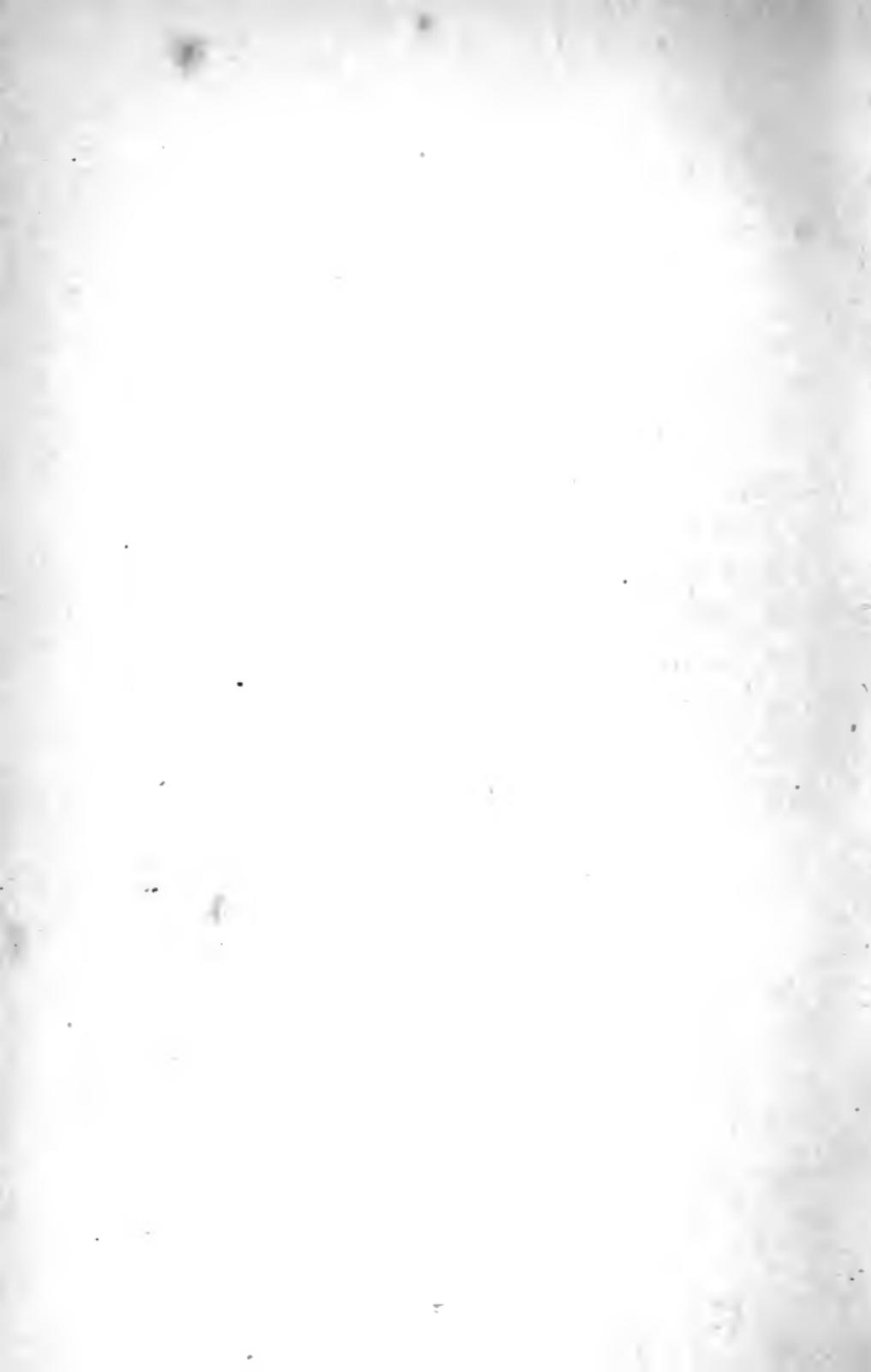
IN WHOM I HONOUR ALIKE

THE PHYSICIAN AND THE MAN.

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“Men are led by strange ways. One should have tolerance for a man, hope of him; leave him to try yet what he will do.”—CARLYLE.



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THE REPENTANCE OF PAUL WENTWORTH.



CHAPTER I.

MRS. PAUL WENTWORTH.

“ Is it worth a dream, is it worth an hour,
To think of things that are well outworn ? ”

SWINBURNE.

THE London season was fast drawing to its close. By the fortunate participants in its magic delights it was pronounced to have been a peculiarly brilliant one, marked by more striking social successes and fewer astounding social failures than had signalized the career of its predecessors for some years past. The Parliamentary session, too, had been sufficiently lively, and productive of such an amount of useful and important legislation, that both noble

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lords and gentlemen fighting more stoutly contested battles in “another place” were alike justified in looking back upon it with feelings of complacency; but it had not been disturbed by any great crisis either in the home or foreign affairs of the nation, and the most ardent legislators had had ample leisure for indulgence in those lighter pastimes which, at critical moments, are deemed unworthy of men to whom the honour of their country should be the all-absorbing interest. In addition, London had been revelling for three months in weather of the most perfect kind—weather such as a glorious English summer, when that infrequent blessing is vouchsafed to the unfortunate inhabitants of these wind-blown, rain-washed islands, alone brings with it.

But all pleasant and enjoyable things have their term of life, and the lease of this sunshiny, joyous, intoxicating season’s brief existence had almost run out. Some there were who regretted the near approach of its hour of dissolution; some who, though they had spent the past four months in an incessant round of riding, driving, dancing, and flirting, giving dinners and making speeches, paying visits and contriving costumes, would fain have prolonged those laudable exer-

cises for a space. These enthusiastic votaries of fashionable dissipation were, however, few and far between, and belonged for the most part to the weaker sex. The great majority of the lords of creation, however agreeable they might have found the course of time since the Easter recess, were sighing for “fresh fields and pastures new,” and looking forward with ill-restrained impatience to the approaching twelfth of August.

Not a few shutters in Park Lane were finally closed, intimating to all whom it might concern that the owners of the dwellings thus shrouded from the public gaze had left town. But in the streets running down from it at right angles, inhabited to a great extent by professional men, whose avocations debar them from spending their lives in a perpetual chase of the goddess Pleasure, nearly every house still displayed open windows and well-replenished window-boxes, glowing with the floral beauty so welcome to the eye amidst the general grime of a great city. One house, so large that it seemed to dwarf its more modestly proportioned neighbours, occupying the corner of one of these streets, was especially remarkable for the magnificence of its summer decoration, which overflowed every window and balcony and coign of vantage,

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clothing the grey stone walls and the Corinthian portico, blackened by the London atmosphere, with a many-hued mantle of rich and delicate colouring. People who took a utilitarian view of the value of money wondered idly, and a little indignantly sometimes, how much of the precious commodity Mr. Wentworth—the house in question being the residence of that eminent barrister—was in the habit of squandering annually on this favourite vanity.

At all events he left himself a margin for exercising his taste indoors as well as out. A sense of luxury and charm pervaded every corner of his house, and the hand of an art collector who thoroughly understood his hobby was apparent in the disposition of every picture and bronze and bit of china which adorned its handsome rooms. There was something absolutely soothing to an artistic mind in the perfect unity of design which prevailed unbroken from hall to attic.

Unfortunately—since men and women have not yet learnt, like the lower forms of organic life, to adapt themselves invariably to their environment—such surroundings are but poor evidence of the higher kind of harmony which should prevail throughout the human lives of

which they are the setting and the outcome. A fretful temper is ill soothed by the contemplation of the most matchless Sèvres and Wedgwood, nor can the most truly aesthetic of rugs and curtains minister tranquillity to an unquiet spirit ; so it came to pass that, on the particular July day of which we are treating, it would have been difficult to find in London a more discontented woman than Mrs. Wentworth, as she sat alone in her artistically draped and furnished morning-room — perhaps the most delightful nook in the charming home over which she presided as mistress.

The day was unpleasantly hot; people were leaving town in shoals; and the first of Mrs. Wentworth's country-house invitations would not be available for more than three weeks to come —all which grievances combined to form a very good and sufficient set of reasons for any amount of ennui and dissatisfaction on that lady's part. Not that she was in the habit of justifying her moods either to herself or to others. Discontent was too common a frame of mind with her to induce her to seek very earnestly for its causes, and she usually made no effort to rid herself of the incubus, but endured it passively, as she would have endured a cold or a toothache, till

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some pleasurable excitement chased away the brooding cloud. Yet, as she reclined in a low chair near her pretty tea-table, with its dainty equipage of silver and porcelain, her fair head resting on a silken cushion, and the unmistakable hue of perfect health brightening her still transparent cheek, she looked like one to whom the lines had fallen in pleasant places enough.

Alice Wentworth, as a bride of nineteen, had been a very pretty girl; and though fifteen years had run their course since she became a wife, she was a pretty woman still. She had a tall, well-formed figure, not too plump for matronly grace, and small, shapely hands and feet. Her profile was far from perfect, but her full face, though deficient in animation, was decidedly pleasing; her cold blue eyes were large and clear, and her admirably poised head was crowned with heavy coils of bright glossy hair. But her great glory was her complexion—smooth, delicately coloured, and, despite her habitual air of discontent, not yet marred by faintest line or wrinkle. You might safely pronounce her a woman who had never known either sorrow or disappointment, save of the most trivial kind; a woman whose heart had never suffered the fierce pangs of jealousy, whose mind had never been racked by

the intolerable torments of suspense. Nevertheless, there had been moments in her life's history which might well have awakened these feelings in her breast, moments which might have been expected to stamp furrows on her unruffled brow and dim her unclouded eyes with bitter weeping; but her countenance bore no trace of such storms. A species of fretful impatience seemed the most vehement expression of emotion it was capable of.

This look had been gradually creeping over her features all through the long dull hours of the sultry July afternoon, and this emotion evinced itself plainly in her languid and irritable movements. Both languor and irritability, however, vanished suddenly at the sound of the opening door, and the announcement of a visitor who, though shorter, plainer, and less faultlessly dressed than her hostess, yet bore a sufficiently marked resemblance to her to proclaim their sisterly relationship.

Mrs. Wentworth welcomed her sister with a becoming show of cordiality, alike removed from frigidity and effusion. In very truth, Emily's society was a relief to the tedium of an unoccupied afternoon, a bore which Alice, by careful and provident forethought, usually managed to

avoid. Hence there was a shade more warmth in her greeting and her proffer of the indispensable cup of tea than she usually threw into her manner when receiving Mrs. Chamberlain, a less fortunate and brilliant woman than herself, beneath her roof.

A few unimportant remarks were exchanged while the tea was being discussed, and then Mrs. Chamberlain, setting down her cup, inquired, "And now, Alice, I want to ask you what plans you have made—no more tea, dear, thanks; I never take a second cup—plans for the autumn, I mean? Of course you will be leaving town in a few days?"

"I don't know, I am sure," Mrs. Wentworth replied, somewhat disconsolately, but still in the measured and carefully modulated tones on which she prided herself. "I have a heap of invitations for the autumn months, and the Logan Frasers have asked me to go to them in Perthshire on the eleventh of August, but I hardly know how I shall fill up the time till then."

"Would you come to us for a fortnight before you go to Scotland? We are almost on your road, and George would be proud to drive you about and show you the country. It might be good for you after the racket of the season,

though I cannot say you look much the worse for it at present."

"Thank you, Emily," Mrs. Wentworth answered dubiously, speaking even more slowly and deliberately than her wont, while she mentally reviewed the situation and balanced the arguments for and against accepting Mrs. Chamberlain's hospitality. "You are very kind, and it would be a great treat to me—yes, I will certainly come for ten days. By the end of that time you and George will have had quite enough of me," she added, with the arch smile her admirers reckoned among her most winning charms.

In her heart she was thinking, "Ten days will save me from being left in town after August has actually begun, and I really could not stand a longer spell of George's society. If Lady Philippa should ask me to join her yachting party after all, I can easily make some excuse to Emily; one needn't stand on ceremony with a sister."

Mrs. Chamberlain was overjoyed. She was honestly fond of Alice, and pleased at the prospect of her companionship for an uninterrupted period of ten days; pleased too at the thought of the social lustre Mrs. Paul Wentworth's

presence would shed over the garden *fêtes* and dinner-parties she intended organizing for her benefit during her stay at Croxley Grange. It had long been the desire of the younger sister's heart to exhibit her beautiful and brilliant relative to the *élite* of that county society of which she and her husband were respected, though undistinguished members, but hitherto Alice had not been willing to fall in with her schemes. On this occasion, therefore, she had preferred her petition with diffidence, and without much hope of success ; and Mrs. Wentworth's ready acquiescence filled her with pride and delight.

Much elated, she spent some twenty minutes in arranging a select house-party to meet Mrs. Wentworth at Croxley on the last day of July. Alice listened graciously to her eager talk, putting in a languid word now and then to suggest a fresh name, or to negative one proposed by Mrs. Chamberlain ; but, although she spoke little, it came to pass at the close of the consultation that out of Emily's original list of guests to be invited, only one or two remained—the rest had been struck out in favour of her own nominees. She had a habit, brought to perfection by long practice, of getting her own way in these little

matters in a singularly ladylike and unobtrusive fashion.

Mrs. Chamberlain, having despatched the business of her visit, was preparing to take her leave when a thought seemed to strike her. "How foolish of me not to have remembered them sooner!" she exclaimed in a tone of real regret. "There are the children, Alice; I dare say you would like to bring them with you, and now we have filled up every room in the house. Never mind, I need not ask the Maxwells. We know them very slightly, and owe them no special civilities, so I will cross out their names, and then there will be plenty of space for Stella and Mabel."

"Pray don't trouble yourself to do anything of the kind, Emily," answered Mrs. Wentworth, with just a tinge of asperity in her dulcet voice. "I should like to meet the Maxwells; and as for Estelle and Mabel, their father will probably take them down to The Cottage next month as usual. He is an infatuated parent, you must know," she added, with a slight laugh.

"Oh, well!" said Mrs. Chamberlain, feeling herself rebuffed, "if you think they will be happy with him——"

"Perfectly happy," interposed the mother of

the young ladies under discussion. "Certainly very much happier than they would be under my wing. I don't approve of spoiling children, nor do I see my way to being at their beck and call morning, noon, and night. Paul does."

To this decided expression of opinion on her sister's part Mrs. Chamberlain made no rejoinder. She rose and deliberately buttoned her long gloves, lingering over every fastening with the exasperating dilatoriness of a person who has something special to say but shrinks from saying it. When she had arrived at the fourth button of the second glove, she summoned courage to remark, without raising her eyes, "I met Paul at the Comptons' on Wednesday. He was not looking very well, I fancied."

"He is all right, I believe," replied Paul's wife carelessly. "He is always well. I wonder at it sometimes, I am sure, when I think of the railroad speed he lives at. Where did you say you saw him, Emily?"—with a faint accent of surprise.

"At the Comptons'—a musical 'At Home. I half hoped to have met you there also."

"Oh, I never go to the Comptons' parties. The music is first-rate, I admit, but the rooms are too small, and they fill them with a terrible

conglomerate of all kinds. I am surprised at my lord's condescending so far, unless"—with a sudden dawn of mischief in her countenance—"Mrs. Stuart was there? Ah! she was; I see it in your ingenuous blush, Emily! And Paul doubtless played devotion in his very best manner, and was to be seen at her side the whole evening in a variety of Early English attitudes?"

Alice's gibing tone evidently jarred upon Mrs. Chamberlain. "He certainly made himself—and her—very conspicuous," she answered, with flushed cheeks, giving her whole attention to the seventh button. Alice rose to her feet with a little laugh, and laid her hands lightly on her sister's shoulders.

"My dear Emily, pray don't look so distressed. You see I can bear the recital of these harrowing narratives quite calmly, so it is really beside the purpose for you to feel, or feign, confusion. When a woman has a husband gifted with the insatiable vanity of my amiable partner, she very soon learns her lesson. Vanity, my innocent sister, is a deity which *will* have its daily sacrifice. I found out that long ago, and resigned myself to the inevitable with a perfectly good grace."

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“What right has he to neglect you for other women?” said the indignant censor, looking up from the engrossing buttons in the heat of her anger.

“Oh, as to neglect,” Alice answered, with a shrug of her shapely shoulders—“please don’t place me in the despicable category of neglected wives. The neglected wife is the most tiresome female of my acquaintance; I decline to be classed with her. For that matter, I dare say Paul would tell you that *I* neglect *him*. The long and the short of it is, Emily,” she went on, resuming her seat and her former comfortable lounging position, “Paul, like many other men, I suppose, requires a certain amount of incense to be perpetually offered at his shrine. Now, Nature never fitted me for an incense-burner, and very soon after we married I had to make this fact unmistakably clear to him. He was quick to take a hint, I must say, and has never given me any trouble on the subject of household worship since. But his incense he must have, so he seeks his devotees elsewhere, and changes them pretty often, I fancy. That last fact does not surprise me: no woman born could ever for any length of time keep up the fervour of admiration he requires.”

"We all thought he cared so much for you when you were engaged," Mrs. Chamberlain murmured.

"Cared for me? Oh yes, he cared, as you call it, immensely then; and perhaps, excitable as he is, if I had chosen to make myself a white slave to his Majesty from the first I might have retained his gracious favour. That's a moot point, of course, but sometimes I fancy his earliest little affairs were intended to pique me into jealousy. It's all a matter of ancient history now, and, whatever his intentions at the commencement, the habit has clearly outlived the original motive. In any case, I never disquiet myself."

"It makes him dreadfully talked about," Emily said, fingering her parasol nervously. The subject had a fascination for her, but at the same time she was a trifle afraid of angering Mrs. Wentworth by saying too much. She could not bring herself to believe that her sister's cynical indifference was real, and not assumed.

"Talked about! Of course it does. But what harm does that do him—or me? Hasn't he been 'talked about' for—say fourteen years; and doesn't he thrive upon it like the proverbial bay-tree? So long as there is nothing further

than talk, I am no worse off than half the women in society. I'll tell you, Emily"—suddenly sitting upright in her chair—"what I should dislike: any open scandal or *esclandre*, for that is a thing neither he nor I could ever recover. To a man in his profession it would be a death-blow—even his reputation would not stand it. Colonel Stuart did not show any dangerous symptoms at the Comptons', did he?"

"Oh dear, no! On the contrary, he seemed rather gratified by the attentions your husband paid his wife." There was a touch of scorn about Mrs. Chamberlain's brief reply, and she laid an emphasis on the possessive pronouns it contained which may or may not have been altogether due to her contempt for the gallant colonel's insensitivity to the passion of jealousy. But Alice Wentworth was not a sensitive person.

"I am very glad to hear it," she answered, subsiding after her momentary attack of energy and apprehension. "But I might have trusted my lord and master; he has a very long head. Are you really going, Emily? Good-bye for the present, then. It is five o'clock, I see; I must go and dress for my drive." So, suiting the action to the word, she smilingly followed her sister from the room.



CHAPTER II.

HUSBAND AND WIFE.

“The heart’s division divideth us.”

SWINBURNE.

It was not, however, destined to remain long untenanted. Hardly ten minutes had elapsed when a quick firm step ascended the stairs, and the door opened to admit no other than Mr. Wentworth himself—the very “Paul” whose wife seemed to look upon him chiefly as a capital subject for ladylike cynicism. Finding the room unoccupied, he appeared for a moment inclined to beat a hasty retreat; but catching sight of a certain pretty card-case lying on a little table near the window, he checked himself abruptly, and took up a place by the mantelpiece to await Alice’s return.

It might easily have been surmised, from that lady’s recent utterances concerning her husband,

that he was a weak and feather-brained personage ; but nothing could be further from the actual truth than such a surmise. A mere glance at the man himself—at his straight, alert figure and sharply cut, resolute features—would have sufficed to demonstrate the fallacy of the over-hasty conclusion. Keenness and strength were the most marked characteristics of Mr. Wentworth's thin, olive-complexioned face, with its square forehead, penetrating dark eyes, and determined mouth ; intellect and will had stamped themselves indelibly upon every line of it. It was not a handsome face—it was too worn and colourless, as well as too irregular in feature, to be called handsome ; but it was an attractive face, nevertheless, by reason of sheer intellectual force, and an individuality so strong as to be almost aggressive. At first sight it seemed wanting in animation and mobility, but a longer study of it would discover the fact that it was capable of softening very considerably under stress of emotion, and kindling into life in a manner altogether surprising at the touch of passion or enthusiasm. Not an easy face to decipher by any means. Certain records of the past had undoubtedly traced themselves on its surface, but they were written for the most

part in a hieroglyphic character. The dark and rather mournful hue of the handwriting alone gave any clue to their possible meaning.

Mr. Wentworth, leaning quietly against the mantelpiece, with his eyes fixed expectantly on the door which was to admit his wife, looked like a man accustomed to face the world without flinching, and to get his own way in it. His whole figure had something commanding about it, which was certainly not due solely to physique; for, although he was fairly entitled to be called a tall man, his height was by no means exceptionally great, and in build he was rather slender than imposing. But thews and inches have really little to do with dignity of bearing. Giants of magnificent proportions often lack it altogether, while it may not infrequently be found abnormally developed in the person of some attenuated little student who would never have a chance of obtaining the modest situation of second footman in any well-regulated household.

I have said that Mr. Wentworth looked like a man accustomed to get his own way in the world, and perhaps it would have been singular had he not carried about him some subtle hint of the success that had waited on his footsteps through-

out his career. His mental powers were naturally very great, and they had had full play at the Bar, where he had risen with marvellous rapidity, winning his way to fame and fortune over obstacles which to a less determined man might have appeared insurmountable; and at an age when many of his less gifted contemporaries were just struggling into notice and competence, he was already in enjoyment of a splendid income and serenely conscious that the highest legal honours lay within measurable reach of his vaulting ambition. As an authority on International Law—a subject which, in consequence of certain grave political complications on the Continent, engaged men's minds to an extraordinary degree at the date when this story has its commencement—he stood unrivalled among English jurists; and his recent appointment as legal representative of Great Britain at a General Conference of the Great Powers about to meet in London, for the purpose of settling a disputed point in the code of nations (a point on which the peace of Europe might be said to hang suspended), had added fresh lustre to a reputation already sufficiently dazzling.

All this had come to Paul Wentworth so early in life; that at the age of forty he had begun to

weary a little of purely professional toils and rewards, and to weave new and larger schemes for the future satisfaction of his ambition. He was a keen politician, though he had never yet sat in the House of Commons. Men who knew him well, however, asserted that he was only biding his time, and that he looked forward to a political career as his ultimate goal, caring little for professional prizes—he was never more than half a lawyer at heart, they said. Certainly he seemed calculated to make his mark at St. Stephen's. Together with strong practical sense, and a large allowance of what are known as “business qualities,” he possessed all an orator’s gifts—including a remarkably fine voice—brought by long training and practice to something very nearly approaching perfection; and these facts might well render it a matter for surprise that he should so long have resisted the temptation of appearing in the Parliamentary arena. But however dilatory he might seem in executing his intention, no one doubted but what it would be executed in the end. Despite a certain superficial variability of mood, and an inconsistency and caprice marking many of his actions, there were few who did not credit Wentworth with a secret firmness of will and tenacity of purpose beyond

that of most men, and among his more useful qualities might be reckoned an inexhaustible amount of patience where any desirable end was to be attained.

He had full opportunity of calling this valuable gift into play while awaiting his wife in her pretty sanctum, for she spent quite an unconscionable time adorning herself for her afternoon's drive. However, he bore the enforced delay with heroic fortitude, and when Alice at length returned to the room, he was still in his old place and attitude.

She was an agreeable vision in her harmonious draperies of silver-grey, and the eyes of the man who was her husband rested upon her with a glance of approval as she came forward. Wentworth was always keenly alive to any special beauty or fitness in a woman's attire, and though his wife was invariably faultlessly dressed according to the fashionable code of the hour, it was only now and then that she gratified his fastidious taste with such completeness as at this moment. For an instant his face was lit up by a gleam of artistic satisfaction, such as might have been evoked by the sight of a well-planned flower-bed or a pretty *genre* painting; then it faded as quickly as it came, and left him looking even more impassive than before.

Alice Wentworth saw her husband distinctly, but for some reason or other she chose to ignore his presence for a few seconds.

“I wonder if I can have left my card-case here?” she murmured half aloud, moving towards the window. Then, halting with a well-feigned gesture of surprise: “You—Paul!” she exclaimed, pausing just long enough between the two monosyllables to show that she merely added the second lest the first alone should sound discourteous or unladylike. “Did you want to speak to me?” she inquired in her usual soft voice, but with a subtle intonation which conveyed an undercurrent of meaning to the acute ear of her auditor. He translated it without difficulty into some such phrase as “To what am I indebted for the honour of this visit?”

“Yes,” he answered a little stiffly; “I was anxious to see you before the six o’clock post goes out. I wanted to know when you were thinking of leaving town—you spoke vaguely yesterday of some time next month—and whether you would be inclined to take the children with you, as I am thinking of going abroad?”

“You are thinking of going abroad?” Mrs. Wentworth repeated slowly in genuine astonishment. She was thoroughly surprised and a

trifle uneasy. ("He can't be going to do anything desperate about Mrs. Stuart, surely," she reflected mentally, "or he would hardly come and confide his plans to me, tolerant as I am.") "Shall you be away long?" she inquired aloud, taking a seat at the same time.

"About a month, probably. Certainly not longer, for I must be in London for the International Conference on the third of September. Indeed, I have had difficulty in making up my mind to go at all, there were so many obstacles in the way. But I have not felt quite the thing lately—I suppose two or three almost unbroken years of work such as mine would tell on any man at last—and I find I must have a real holiday, if only a short one."

"I think you are perfectly right to indulge yourself; you certainly do look a little fagged," Alice rejoined politely. "Do you mean to go far afield?"

"No, I think not. I merely want a complete change of air and scene, with plenty of outdoor exercise, and a quiet place where I can be at peace to get that new book of mine through the press. The book is my reason for not taking Stella and Mabel with me. Otherwise they are quite old enough to travel now, and I should

have been glad of their companionship, for I mean to keep out of the stream of tourists and try a solitary existence for a while."

(“Is this a deep-laid plot, and is he trying to throw dust in my eyes ?” Alice pondered. “No, that was never his way. More probably he and his latest worshipper have quarrelled, and he is going into temporary retirement in a huff.”)

“I am afraid you will find that dull work,” she observed sweetly. “But if you don’t wish to go far, why not try the Italian lakes ? They are almost deserted at this season, and you don’t mind any amount of heat. It’s a long time since you saw them, too ; I don’t think you have been there for fifteen years.”

She raised her head as she spoke and looked him deliberately full in the face, smiling steadily, yet with an expression closely akin to malice sparkling in her keen blue eyes. She was anxious to see if her last shaft hit the mark at which she had aimed. For Paul Wentworth and his girl-bride had spent their honeymoon on the shores of Como and Lugano just fifteen years ago.

His dark cheek grew two or three shades darker, unfailing evidence in his case of some feeling that would have made a fairer man

colour hotly. But whether the feeling now was one of shame, regret, or simple annoyance, it would be hard to determine.

“No, I shall not go to Italy,” he answered briefly. “I am a little surprised at your suggesting it. Norway I had thought of,” he continued, with a manifest effort at returning to his former manner, “but there is a terrible want of the ordinary comforts of life to be encountered there, and I have no wish to live on hermit’s fare, even for a month. Most likely I shall go to Switzerland. I know of two or three pretty sequestered places there, any of which would suit me very well.”

“When do you start?” Mrs. Wentworth asked. Her experiment had succeeded in a manner, but, curiously enough, she felt rather vexed than elated by the result.

“I should like to be off by the first of August, if possible. That is the reason I wanted to hear if you had made any definite plans for yourself, so as to arrange for the children.”

“I am sorry, but I cannot possibly take them with me,” Mrs. Wentworth returned calmly. “Of course I relied on their going to The Cottage with you as usual, or perhaps I might have been able to manage differently. As matters stand

now, I go on the thirty-first to Emily, who will have every room in her house full, and after that to the Logan Frasers'?"

"You don't think your sister could possibly find room for them?" Mr. Wentworth inquired, with a slight curl of the lip. He had chanced to meet his sister-in-law in the hall on her way out, and she, being in a somewhat perturbed state of mind, had fallen upon the idea of having the two children to stay with her as a safe topic of conversation. But Alice knew nothing of this.

"No," she replied decidedly; "I happen to know that she has filled up every available nook and corner. But why shouldn't Estelle and Mabel go down to The Cottage without you? They like the place, and Miss Lawson——"

Mr. Wentworth interrupted his wife with less than his usual courtesy. "Miss Lawson's holidays begin next week."

"So they do; I forgot. But Dickinson can go with them, and she is a thoroughly trustworthy person."

"Doubtless she is; nevertheless, if you have no other plan to suggest, I will send a line to my sister Margaret, and ask her to take them in for a month. I should wish them to have some

better protector than Dickinson while I am away."

"As you like," Mrs. Wentworth said, rising to her feet as a signal that she considered the domestic conference at an end. "They are very fond of their aunt Margaret, and will be very happy with her, I have no doubt; and Margaret is always so kind about receiving them. We may consider that settled, I suppose, so I will go, for I have kept the horses standing an unconscionable time already."

"You will find it sultry driving," was her husband's sole rejoinder, as he held open the door for her to pass through. He was leisurely descending the stairs some ten or twelve steps in rear of her graceful figure, when there was a sudden rush of light feet behind him, accompanied by a whirlwind of gauzy summer frocks and floating hair, and a cry of delight from two shrill treble voices.

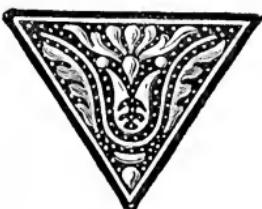
"Father! father! here you are at last! We have been looking for you *everywhere* for the last half-hour."

"Father, let me bring my drawing into your study and show you what I've done since breakfast."

"Father, Miss Lawson is very unjust. Do tell her——"

Can this be the Wentworth of a few minutes ago—this man with the kindly smile on his lips, the loving light in his eyes, on whose arm his little daughters hang so confidently and caressingly, pouring out grievances, recounting schemes, happily secure of his ready and well-tried sympathy? Two very ordinary little maidens of eleven and twelve they are, with irregular features and rosy cheeks remarkable for health rather than beauty, yet he beams down on them as if they were paragons of childish loveliness. On the doorstep, Mrs. Wentworth, about to enter her victoria, turns to give a parting order to the servant, and catches sight of the closely linked trio on the stairs.

“Paul is certainly a compound of contradictions,” she said to herself as she drove away. “No wonder people in general find him a riddle. I have been married to him for fifteen years, and I own he puzzles me yet.”





CHAPTER III.

MURIEL.

“A rose with all its sweetest leaves yet folded.”

BYRON.

IN London, with its overheated atmosphere and overcrowded thoroughfares, with its glowing pavements and glaring stucco, its incessant din of traffic and whirl of excited, eager living, the summer day of which I have written might well be called sultry and oppressive. But on Alderton Common it was not oppressive, only brilliantly, gloriously hot. Floods of golden sunshine out of a cloudless dark-blue sky illumined every tree and juniper bush, every flower and blade of grass, with a transient glory, but the fierce rays were tempered by a soft breeze that set the luxuriant bracken waving gracefully as it passed, and rustled pleasantly in the belt of pine-trees bounding the common on its south-western verge.

The scene was a fair one. Alderton Common, at all times undoubtedly one of the most beautiful in England, could not fail to look fair on such a day. It had once formed part of a royal demesne, and still bore the appearance of a chase rather than a common, being thickly studded at various points with timber, over and above its pine-wood boundary. Its configuration was very striking. Starting from an elevated plateau on the side nearest the village, the common sloped away past the church, parsonage, and old-fashioned Manor House towards the south, breaking into a hundred graceful hollows and fantastic dells, carpeted at this season with a thousand mosses and grasses and wild flowers, and alive with bees and butterflies and countless myriads of short-lived insects rejoicing in their brief summer of existence. This favoured spot, lying as it did in a thickly populated home county, had become a kind of show place to the country-side; and it was naturally a special source of pride to the well-disposed inhabitants of Alderton in general, and to Mr. Ferrars, the lord of the manor, in particular. For this last reason, it was the peculiar pleasure of those inhabitants of Alderton who might be described as *ill-disposed*—especially towards Mr. Ferrars and the party of order

he represented—to injure and deface in any way that might occur to their limited intellects this beautiful survival of the old feudal times. When the great common-burning mania spread through the home counties, Alderton suffered severely at the hands of the population that squatted on its borders—for the most part a rough, lawless set, with a strong sprinkling of the poaching and gipsy fraternities among them. But it was too large to burn satisfactorily (as the incendiaries speedily found) in a damp climate like ours, and a few months sufficed to repair all traces of the wanton ravages wrought on its smiling countenance.

It was hard to decide at which season it looked its best. To a stranger's eye nothing could be more attractive than its midsummer garb. Mr. Ferrars preferred it when the snow covered it to the depth of a foot or so, and the fir-branches were laden with icicles. While with his two daughters it was always a disputed point whether it should be pronounced loveliest in springtime, when the gorse covered it with a sheet of yellow bloom and the cherry orchards (for Alderton was the centre of a great cherry-growing district) encircled it with a girdle of snow-white blossoms, or in the autumn, when

the woods began to wear the hectic tints of decay, and the purple heath which Muriel loved, but which Lucy called "a poor thing by way of a flower," took the place of its more splendid elder sisters.

People said sometimes that Mr. Ferrars' daughters were singularly unlike him in disposition and character. This may have been true in many ways, but in one respect at least they both resembled him—in an intense affection for their home and all pertaining to it, and especially for Alderton Common, with which all their earliest associations were indissolubly connected. It had been their playground in their motherless childhood, their outdoor schoolroom as they grew in years and sedateness, the scene of their only brother's first triumphs in running and tree-climbing, cricket and football; and now that womanhood was dawning upon them it was their favourite haunt still. Nowhere else did they feel so entirely happy and at home. Muriel daily carried her books and her day-dreams to the pine wood in preference to pondering over them in the Manor House garden or under the trees of the park beyond, and Lucy as regularly followed her thither, with her work, and chatter, and endless schemes for the future.

They are there as usual this magnificent July afternoon, looking delightfully cool in the simple white dresses which contrast so strikingly with their dark hair. Superficially alike, in reality their faces have as many points of difference as their characters. Lucy, sitting upright in a kind of natural chair formed by the roots of two neighbouring trees, is a brilliant little brunette of seventeen, with great sparkling eyes, a trim, dainty figure, and pretty, plump, notable-looking hands. Hers is not the beauty of the rosebud ; she suggests rather a very fresh but perfectly opened flower, since, for all her extreme youth, there is about her a rounded completeness and an air of self-reliance usually wanting in very young girls. Far otherwise is it with her sister, a slender, willowy figure leaning against the pine-stem at her side. Muriel is two years older than Lucy, and quite a head taller, but she is much younger in expression and bearing. Less attractive to the casual observer through lack of the colour and animation so conspicuous in Lucy's *piquante* little countenance, her face is nevertheless more regularly beautiful, and, by reason of its very incompleteness in point of expression, far more interesting. A young face should be full of hints, suggestions, possibilities, and there is no

want of these in Muriel's, where a keen eye may already read the promise of intellectual power, individuality, will, and a touch of gentle humour, in spite of its prevailing characteristic of innocent softness. It is not what people sometimes describe as "a face with a history"—as yet. But it is assuredly one of which a history is bound to be written some day, and whose history should be worth the writing. Helen Bretherton, her dead mother's cousin, who loved this girl with the passionate affection which a warm-hearted, lonely old maid gives sometimes to her relations of the younger generation, and sometimes, for want of a better object, to her pug or her canary, used to say (with a touch of the romance which had come to her with the German blood in her veins) that there was a beautiful soul in Muriel Ferrars' face, but it was a sleeping soul. "Some day it will be roused," the kindly little woman would add, with the ready tears in her eyes, "and, oh ! I pray God that it may be a happy waking."

Just now there is abundance of life and joyousness glowing in the tranquil, dark-grey eyes, and playing about the sensitively moulded mouth, as she scans an open letter in her hand, while Lucy glances at her from time to time

with manifest impatience, which at last finds an outlet in speech.

“I believe, Muriel, you must know the contents of that letter by heart. You have read it, at the very lowest computation, at least twenty times since you first opened it at breakfast seven hours ago!”

“I beg your pardon, Lucy. But this is such a wonderful, beautiful letter—to me, at least—that I feel, except when I am actually reading it, as if I must have been dreaming ever since morning.”

“One would imagine it was your first love-letter,” Lucy rejoined tartly. “What does it amount to, when all is said? An invitation to spend a month with a professorial uncle and a literary aunt, both of them thorough book-worms, and so absorbed in each other and in their work for posterity that they scarcely ever speak!”

“To spend a month with them in Switzerland, remember,” Muriel corrected eagerly. “That makes all the difference. Not but what I enjoyed my visits to them at Oxford very much——”

“Oxford was a totally different affair,” interrupted the other. “I should have no objection

to spending May or June with Uncle Alec and Aunt Isabel myself—in Oxford. There, I dare say, you did enjoy yourself. You might be a prey to dulness in the mornings, perhaps; but then you always had the cathedral, and Magdalen Chapel, and the river in the evenings, and clever people—clever people unlike Uncle Alec, who did speak to common mortals sometimes—coming in and out at intervals. I have no doubt one could amuse one's self very well staying with them in Oxford. But to go abroad with them!—not to travel, for Aunt Isabel expressly says they don't mean travelling, but to rush in express trains to some remote corner of Switzerland 'off the beaten track of tourists' (I know Uncle Alec's ways), and there vegetate in loneliness for the space of one calendar month—why, you would be far better off at home, playing tennis with me and Jack!"

"I can play tennis with you and Jack at any time; I shall not have another chance of seeing the Alps for years perhaps. I am nineteen, remember"—this was said rather magnificently—"and this is the first opportunity I have had. I might have to wait as long again before such another came in my way a second time."

"What are the Alps?" quoth Lucy senten-

tiously. "Like the Gogmagogs in the Cambridge anecdote, they are very high hills. In addition, some of them are covered with snow. You can't live upon the companionship of very high hills—even when they are covered with snow—for four weeks and not find their society tedious. The same set of hills, too, recollect, as you will not be moving about. Perhaps there'll be a lake as well; I'll throw that into the picture, if you like. And by that lake you'll have to wander alone, a female St. Kevin, while Uncle Alec sits within-doors surrounded by a pile of manuscripts, with Aunt Isabel mending his pens and bidding you 'Hush! and run away,' when you burst in occasionally to describe a sunset or a storm."

"I dare say I shall feel dull sometimes," the elder girl confessed frankly, "but still I think it is worth while to run the risk of feeling dull occasionally for the sake of seeing even a corner of Switzerland." There was a quiet determination in Muriel's voice which showed that, gentle as she was, she had a will of her own capable of withstanding her younger sister's impetuous onslaughts. "Of course," she went on, "it would be far nicer if you were coming too, for I cannot expect Uncle Alec or Aunt Isabel to

have much time to give me, and I must make up my mind to being a good deal alone."

" You had better do so, certainly," Lucy answered grimly, " for I shall expect you to return having become quite unfamiliar with the use of your native tongue. Uncle Alec is silent enough in his family circle at the best of times, unless you start him off on one of his enthusiasms—and then he doesn't talk, he harangues or rhapsodizes—so in the absorption of revising a metaphysical work, he will probably prove a veritable Trappist. As to Aunt Isabel, she is simply his shadow; I don't believe she has any individual existence apart from him at all."

" No, they are an ideal husband and wife," Muriel answered thoughtfully, looking away between the smooth boles of the pine-trees at the bracken dancing in the summer breeze on the open common.

" Ideal as regards each other," replied practical Lucy, " but not at all ideal—if by that you mean perfect or even admirable—in the other relations of life. With the best intentions, I dare say, I believe Uncle Alec to be the most inefficient parish priest of our acquaintance and look what a father and mother they make! Mildred might have been alive now, if Aunt

Isabel had looked after her when she was first taken ill, instead of going on unconcernedly copying for Uncle Alec till poor Milly was literally dying of consumption; and as to Harry, I am sure I don't wonder he ran away from home—a home where the stairs were never swept and the handles were off half the tea-cups!"

Muriel looked perplexed and a little distressed at this outburst of indignation. "I fancy people—married women—find it very hard sometimes to reconcile their duty to their husbands and their duty to their children," she said. "Perhaps it was so with Aunt Isabel. She may have found it necessary to make an election, and she elected Uncle Alec because she found he would have all or nothing."

"Then she should have taught him to be less selfish," answered the censor of seventeen, with the uncompromising severity of her years. "But I am afraid they are both past cure now, so there is no use discussing their failings. You are bent on going with them, I suppose? Mind, I speak in your interests. Of course I shall miss you very much; and as you had to wait a year in order that we might come out together, it does seem a pity to separate during

the first summer and with the nicest parties just coming on. But that's a minor matter. I am really afraid you will regret going off in this way."

"I don't think it is likely," Muriel replied. "I won't venture to mention the mountains again, after your late tirade against them, but think how amusing the change of scene and customs and life will be! Recollect how little I have seen of the world. And everything in Switzerland will be new to me."

"You won't see the life," Lucy persisted. "It is not as if you would be staying in one of the great hotels, where you would meet plenty of English people to fraternize with, and foreigners to study or laugh at as you felt inclined. Do you imagine for a moment that Uncle Alec is going to revise a great work on metaphysics in what he would call a *caravanserai* of that kind? Not he. He'll carry you off to some remote *châlet* perched on the top of an inaccessible cliff, or three parts surrounded by water (as my first geography book described a peninsula to be), and calling itself a *pension*, where you'll never see a soul to interest you."

Muriel's laugh rang out pleasantly in answer to this sally, subdued but heartily mirthful.

“Lucy, Lucy, you prove too much! A *pension* implies *pensionnaires*.”

“I did not deny their existence. I only said you would find no one to interest you, for, as a matter of fact, it is the baser sort who frequent *pensions*, as you will find.”

“How about Uncle Alec and his party?” Muriel inquired, laughing still.

“Uncle Alec is an eccentricity, a man apart, and you have to follow at his chariot-wheels perforce. But I know what I say holds good as a rule. There will be no one in your *pension* but two or three *bourgeois* German families taking an economical holiday, all wearing spectacles and eating with their knives, and a couple of strong-minded British female tourists, duly equipped with knapsacks and waterproofs, perpetually executing libellous likenesses of your beloved mountains. Now and then the monotony will be enlivened by a poor curate or schoolmaster on a pedestrian tour, who will start off on excursions with the dawn each day, and only reappear about nine o’clock at night with dishevelled hair and hobnailed boots covered with dust. See if I am not a true prophet.”

“You’re a very dismal one, at any rate,” smiled Muriel. “I won’t let my anticipations be damped

by your doleful prophecies, though. Seriously, Lucy," she went on, "I cannot quite understand why you should be so set against my going. For you are set against it, you know."

"I am against it for a great many reasons," Lucy replied, suddenly dropping her half-jesting manner and assuming an air of worldly wisdom. "For a great many reasons," she repeated. "I think you will be bored. I think it is a pity you should be out of everything here this summer. I think——"

"Well, Lucy, go on."

"I think—at any rate, it would be better—I mean, I should not mind your going so much, if you were really engaged to Jack. As it is now——"

"Really engaged—to Jack!" Muriel repeated indignantly, her fair face suddenly aflame. "What reason have you for supposing that I am likely, ever likely to become engaged to him?"

"Well," Lucy answered, a little abashed in spite of herself, "you know it is plain enough what *he* wishes."

"I know nothing of the kind"—with great energy. "He has never spoken one word to lead me to think that he has any such wishes."

"And why hasn't he spoken the one word?"

cried Lucy, recovering spirit again after her momentary discomfiture. "Because you won't let him. Because you know how shy and diffident and easily silenced he is, and never give him a chance of speaking. Because you turn the edge of every remark he makes with a laugh or a sarcasm, as if you thought it all fun, or else change the conversation so suddenly that you put him quite out of countenance.

"If I do, what of that?" Muriel answered, still with some heat, and shifting her ground, womanlike, to parry this fresh attack. "It is the only right and proper thing for me to do. You take a perverse pleasure in making yourself out very worldly and heartless, Lucy, but I don't believe you would affect to think that a girl would be doing right in encouraging a man to propose to her, just to have the opportunity of saying 'No' to him."

"But why should you say 'No'?" retorted the juvenile matchmaker at her feet. "I am sure Jack is very nice, quite the nicest fellow in the whole neighbourhood; and he is dreadfully in love with you, Muriel."

Muriel blushed at this assertion of the absent Jack's desperate devotion, but not altogether with displeasure. What girl of nineteen, let her

be ever so heart-whole, would not feel a thrill of gratification on being assured that the best-looking and most eligible young bachelor for twenty miles round was "dreadfully in love" with her?

"I am sorry if what you say is true," she answered, with a pretty air of dignified regret, neither accepting nor contradicting her sister's statement, "for I am very certainly not in love with him. How could I be? To begin with, I always feel years older than Jack, and how could one be in love with a person who seems like one's younger brother?"

"Your feelings are very absurd, as Jack is in no way related to us, and happens to be six years older than you are."

"Yes, I know he is in reality; in actual age, that is to say. But I am the elder in mind, Lucy. Jack is very young in knowledge of the world."

"I think you are growing very conceited. What do you know of the world, pray?" (This was really a pertinent question, and Muriel felt it to be such.) "Surely a young man who has been at Eton and Oxford ought to know a good deal more of the world than a girl like you!"

"He ought to, no doubt—but he does not.

I don't think Jack is receptive of new ideas. His views of life are his mother's views; he has never learnt to think for himself about anything."

"Well, take him away from his mother, and give him the necessary independence of character, then," Lucy retorted. "You are determined to find fault with him, but I must say you are very hard to please. I think Jack is quite a lover to be proud of. He is very good-looking——"

"I am glad you admire him so much," Muriel put in sarcastically. "But I am quite ready to admit his good looks."

"Very good-looking," continued Lucy, nothing daunted by the interruption, "a thorough gentleman, well educated—though I don't pretend he is clever—comfortably off too, and a person whose family we know and whom we have known, himself, all our lives." She closed her long catalogue of gifts and graces with a triumphant, "What would you have more?"

Muriel looked away through the pine-trees at the dancing bracken again before she answered, "A good deal more, I think." After that she remained resolutely silent.

"I know what it is!" Lucy exclaimed, when the silence had lasted a minute or two. "You

are altogether too highfrown for ordinary practical life, and you'll end as everybody does who sets up impossible standards—that is to say, you will probably fall lower than those who never aspired to climb so high. Most likely you will marry some man who has made an enormous fortune by dishonest speculation on the Stock Exchange, and is a widower for the second time! Come," she added, as the neighbouring church clock struck five, "let us be moving. Cousin Helen will be expecting us."

"I might be deceived as to the origin of the fortune," Muriel returned gaily, as she hastily collected a pile of books and shawls, "but I protest against the twice bereaved widower. I should not care to play the part of a mere angel of consolation."





CHAPTER IV.

A LEAVE-TAKING.

“Know you not
Such touches are but embassies of Love,
To tamper with the feelings, ere he found
Empire for life?”

TENNYSON.

JUST a week later on, as Alderton church clock again rang out the hour of five, a young man and a dog were to be seen making their way over the fields leading from Eversleigh Court to the pine wood which was the favourite resort of Muriel and Lucy Ferrars. The day, like so many of its predecessors that summer, had been brilliantly fine throughout its earlier hours, but now a kind of sultry, oppressive haze was settling down over the landscape, and the sun showed himself through its heavy curtain only as a ball of sullen blood-red flame. There was no healthful breeze rustling in the tree-tops, or sweeping

gaily over the bracken and heather which clothed the open common; every leaf and frond hung immovable in an almost unnatural and death-like stillness. The very hum of the insects had ceased; the birds preserved a silence utterly unbroken, except by the faint and infrequent cooing of a single distant wood-pigeon.

The young man and his canine companion appeared but little affected by the condition of the atmosphere, for the former strode on for a couple of miles at a rate denoting unusual haste or eagerness without once modifying his pace, and the latter, a lively little fox terrier not long emerged from puppyhood, frisked to the right and left of the field-path, taking advantage of his master's mental abstraction to indulge a little in the pleasures of the chase on his own account. At length, however, even this vigorous pair showed signs of feeling the change which had taken place in the weather. On arriving at the stile which separated the meadows they had been crossing from the pine wood, a sudden halt was called. The man took off his hat and drew a long breath, as if he found the air heavy and the supply of oxygen insufficient, and the dog reluctantly relinquished his pursuit of a stray rabbit, and lay down panting at his owner's feet.

That gentleman, having once halted in his rapid career, appeared in no hurry to resume it. He seated himself with great deliberation on the stile, and gave himself up to reflection and meditation for the space of twenty minutes; and his cogitations were apparently of a perplexing nature, for he knitted his brows profoundly, and more than once pushed back his reddish chestnut hair from his forehead with a gesture of annoyance. Yet that they contained pleasurable elements also, the shy half-smile of satisfaction on his lips gave incontrovertible evidence.

The emotions of Mr. Geoffrey Arlingham—for this was the young man (affectionately styled Jack by his intimates) on whom Lucy Ferrars had newly bestowed such enthusiastic encomium—were indeed at that moment of a highly complex and disturbing nature. The causes of this unpleasant complexity of feeling may be said to have been mainly three in number. He was very much in love with Muriel Ferrars; his mother disapproved of his attachment; and, for reasons both moral and material, he earnestly desired to avoid offending his mother. Could he venture to defy her in obedience to the dictates of a passion commonly supposed to be stronger than either self-interest or fear?

A young man who imagines that he has found the one woman in the world for him, and in the same breath debates whether he shall not give up all thought of winning her because his mother has more ambitious dreams for his future, is not a very attractive specimen of young manhood, no doubt! Yet, in order to discern poor Jack's position rightly, it must be admitted that his mental vacillation had certain excuses. Habit is such a heavy fetter with most men—and Jack's life had been one of habitual subjection from his youth. Naturally timid, always willing to forego his own wishes and pleasures, rather than make a fight for them, he had easily become the slave of a strong-willed, imperious woman, to whom power was the dearest earthly good, and who counted no effort too great to secure the coveted possession. Left early a widow, and appointed sole guardian of her son in his infancy and boyhood, Mrs. Arlingham ruled for twenty years as absolute sovereign at Eversleigh Grange, and when the young monarch himself nominally assumed the reins of government, she still retained virtual power, after the manner of regents who have made themselves indispensable. Jack was too indolent, too timid, and perhaps too anxiously alive to his own pecuniary interests to quarrel

with her. The rent-roll of the Eversleigh estate was a modest one, and without the help of his mother's fortune he would often have found it hard to make both ends meet in his annual expenditure.

It will easily be believed that Mrs. Arlingham, happy in her vicegerency, had no desire for a queen-consort at court to dispute her well-established supremacy. She would prefer Jack's remaining a bachelor for the present; but if the risk of his marrying were to be incurred at all, it must only be in view of certain indisputable advantages, great enough to counterbalance the almost inevitable drawbacks involved to herself personally in any and every alliance her son might form. She must, first of all, choose the bride herself, in order to feel assured that the young lady in question possessed all the attributes necessary to make Jack happy—and among these Mrs. Arlingham reckoned a handsome dowry, influential connections, and a leading position in the county.

Muriel Ferrars possessed none of these good gifts, therefore Mrs. Arlingham decided summarily that she could by no possibility make Jack happy, and that it was mere presumption and frowardness on his part which had caused

him to fall in love with so very ineligible a damsel. And she worked all the levers of persuasion and threat so cleverly, playing now upon Jack's rooted abhorrence of discussion, now upon his keen consciousness of the material disadvantages attendant on an imprudent marriage and a breach with his well-dowered mother, that, great and increasing as was Muriel's attraction for him, he had never allowed himself to be betrayed into anything like a declaration of his passion. Perhaps uncertainty as to how such a declaration would be received by the object of his hesitating devotion helped to seal his lips. She seemed to him often so very bright a particular star as to be almost beyond his hope of winning, notwithstanding her modest position as the daughter of a small landowner, and her absolute lack of a substantial "tocher."

Things had drifted on in this manner from week to week for more than a year, and the situation still showed no symptom of approaching an acute climax, when the announcement of Muriel's intended journey abroad fell upon Jack Arlingham's ears with the force of a disagreeable surprise. He suddenly discovered that it was high time to look about him, or he might chance to lose altogether the prize round which he had

been hovering so long in indecision—a startling and wholly unacceptable idea—and the intimation of Miss Ferrars' speedy departure sent him hurrying into her presence, for once resolute and defiant, ready to end all uncertainty by the utterance of a few unmistakable words.

Circumstances intervened to prevent their utterance on that occasion—do not circumstances invariably intervene to prevent the execution of a hesitating man's tardily formed resolution?—and though he had twice seen his princess since, he had never summoned courage to pick up and weave afresh the broken thread of his intention. Now, as he sat on the stile ruffling his hair and knitting his forehead, he knew that the decisive moment had come. Muriel was to leave Alderton early next morning; if, therefore, he spoke at all before she left, he must speak that evening.

He had set out from Eversleigh, fresh from one of his endless contests with his mother, fully resolved to do so. It was the enthusiasm born of this resolve which had carried him so swiftly over the fields leading to Alderton. When he started, he felt himself quite capable of defying his mother and her threats. If he married Muriel Ferrars, she would cease to join her income to his, and retire to her own house at

Henley, she said? Very well: so much the better for Muriel and himself. They would, of course, have to be economical in consequence, and to live rather differently from the way in which living at Eversleigh had been carried on hitherto—for instance, he would have to give up hunting. His wife must have a pair of carriage horses, naturally, and perhaps he might keep a hack in addition, and a pony for riding round the farm; but a hunting stable would be out of the question. To this sacrifice, however, he felt sure he could easily make up his mind. Possibly it might also be necessary to dismiss his present expensive bailiff, and manage the home farm himself, with a good working headman under him; but this he should not mind at all. As to his moor in the autumn, he could resign it without a pang of regret. His mother should be brought to see that her money was in no way necessary to his existence, or even to his prosperity.

Jack, for the space of a two-mile walk, felt quite heroic. But by the time he had rested ten minutes on that unlucky stile which so inopportunely interposed itself between him and his place of destination, the demon of indecision had begun once more to torment him. The other

side of the question began to come uppermost again. It would be very trying to get no change from home all the year round, and he should feel the loss of his autumn shooting the more when he had no hunting to look forward to in the winter. So disagreeable and humiliating, too, having to withdraw his subscription to the Hunt; it was almost tantamount to taking your name off the roll of county society. Then he knew really nothing about practical farming, and if he tried to manage without Rodgers, he should probably burn his fingers, like his neighbour, Clayton of Stoke Lydiard. In that case, without his mother's assured income to fall back upon, where should he be? Perhaps after all he had better not be rash, and so offend his mother past forgiveness. Surely no mother on earth could hold out permanently against her only child's dearest wishes, and Muriel would be back again in little more than a month's time. Still, if he let her go away without saying anything— Altogether, by the time Jack descended from his rustic seat, and began to cross the common at a much slower pace than he had traversed the fields which led to it, his mind was in a tolerable and by no means enviable state of commotion; nor had it subsided into calm even when he

reached the Manor House, and rang the bell for admittance.

It was a quaint, old-fashioned place, separated only from the white line of road that intersected the common by a stretch of soft turf about fifty yards wide, and a magnificent belt of wych-elms which partially shielded, though they did not altogether screen it from observation. The entrance was through a high iron gate, which, with the equally lofty railings flanking it on either side, was of simple light metal-work, guiltless of tracery or ornamentation, so that the visitor could look straight up the wide flagged walk between the trim flower-beds to the hall-door standing fearlessly and hospitably open alike in winter and summer. A second door, also wide open except in the very coldest weather, was visible at the far end of the vista formed by the hall. This led into the garden behind the house, and through it, even from the outer gate, might be descried a pleasant glimpse of turf walks, shaded by overarching trees and bordered by a gay mixture of many-coloured old-fashioned flowers. Altogether a sweet, wholesome, homely old place, with a flavour of romance clinging to its unpretending simplicity which is rarely to be met with nowadays, whether in town or country.

The drawing-room into which our young man was ushered corresponded admirably with the impression produced by the house at first sight. It was thoroughly in keeping with the flagged entrance walk, the open hall-door, and the glimpses of quaint trim gardening beyond. A large low room, panelled throughout with oak, and hung with pictures intrinsically of varying value, but all toned by the hand of time to a certain harmonious mellowness; having three recessed windows, with deep window-seats, looking towards the common; and furnished without any pretence at a plan with furniture of all styles and dates, from oaken cabinets black with age and filled with china as old or older than themselves, down to the thoroughly modern Broadwood piano—there was a touch of poetry about its undesigned, spontaneous, old-world charm which no Persian *portières* from Liberty's, no Chippendale chairs and Sheraton tables from Gillow's, can give a modern apartment.

This antique interior formed a picturesque setting for the fresh beauty of the Ferrars sisters as they sat, Lucy in one of the window-seats, Muriel in a low chair by the tea-table, when the door opened to admit the much-perturbed Jack. The only other occupant of the room was Helen

Bretherton, a spinster cousin of the late Mrs. Ferrars. She was a slight, colourless little woman of about two and forty, who had inherited her light hair and eyelashes, and a soul brimming over with sentiment and romance, from a North German mother. For the rest, she had the kindest heart in the world, and her innocent affectation of so-called aesthetic modes of dress and poetical forms of speech veiled a good deal of real cleverness and genuine feeling. She had one marked weakness; an aptitude for taking violent fancies and equally violent antipathies to people on first acquaintance; but hitherto this peculiarity had not been productive of any specially disastrous results to herself or others.

The three ladies received Jack with words of hearty welcome, but he was so intent on watching the effect of his arrival on Muriel that he scarcely noticed the greetings of her companions. She met him very kindly, very sweetly, he thought. Perhaps the thought of her approaching departure had, unconsciously to herself, softened her manner; perhaps (who knows?) the floating recollection of Lucy's assurances concerning Jack's devotion influenced her a little. Certainly she had put off the scornful princess for the day.

"We thought you would come, but you are late, Jack," she said, as she poured out his tea.

"Did I—did you expect me?" Jack asked rather blunderingly. He was given to blundering in these little things, if taken by surprise.

"Well, I thought you would probably come to wish me good speed before I set off on my adventurous journey," Muriel answered, "and I believe I should have felt rather hurt if you had not."

She spoke easily and unconstrainedly. They had been playmates in childhood, and friends all their lives; there was no latent coquetry, intentional or accidental, in her words. But she was handing him his cup as she spoke, and as he took it from her, his eyes met hers with such a look in them as made her regret having given utterance to the innocent little bit of raillery. At the same time she was conscious of an odd inexplicable thrill, caused by the glance of mingled reproach and appeal which encountered her own calm gaze. The sensation startled her by its absolute novelty, for though this was by no means the first such glance that Jack had given her, she was not apt to feel moved by his pleading looks. Jack, it may be here observed, had fine blue eyes; and not being specially ready with

his tongue, relied on the former, rather than the latter, for expressing his tender sentiments.

He sat almost silent while Muriel, recovering from her momentary agitation, enlarged with more than wonted vivacity upon her plans and anticipations, Miss Bretherton joining in now and again with an expression of sympathy, Lucy as usual inclining to carp and criticize. Having intimated with some vehemence her opinion of Muriel's extreme folly in going at all, and given a lively sketch of Mr. and Mrs. Erskine and their supposed place of temporary abode in Switzerland, Jack meanwhile remaining speechless or assenting only in monosyllables, she at length appealed to him abruptly.

"What do you think of it, Jack? I should like to get some one to support my view of the case. Father will not trouble himself to argue the matter, and as to you, Cousin Helen, you are ten thousand times worse than Muriel herself. I should like to hear Jack's opinion."

Here was Jack's opportunity, if not to declare all that was in his heart, yet at least to hint at his feelings, by showing a decided objection to Muriel's quitting the neighbourhood, even for a time. But he did not avail himself of it. He was not sufficiently clever to frame an impromptu

reply which should be graceful without being unmistakable in its drift, and he had a suspicion that Lucy was trying to draw him out—and on. His self-communings at the stile rushed back upon him with redoubled strength, and filled him with resentment at the notion of being led into “committing himself before he chose,” as he termed it.

“I don’t know, I’m sure,” he faltered out. “I suppose, as your sister says” (somehow, though he had called her Muriel all his life, he had grown a little shy of using the familiar appellation lately), “it is a chance one does not get very often, and it will be a great change. Oh, I dare say she will find it very enjoyable,” he added rather savagely, with a sudden revulsion of feeling and ebullition of jealous anger at the idea that Muriel should be able to find enjoyment in scenes and circumstances from which he should be wholly absent.

Muriel noted the hesitation with which he uttered the first part of his incoherent little speech. Dimly guessing the cause, it offended her so deeply that she scarcely noticed the ring of resentment with which the stammering utterance closed. She caught up her *rôle* of sarcasm in half a second, and for the next twenty

minutes dazzled Jack with a brilliant display of what he considered her abnormal cleverness. At the end of that time he was more in love than ever, and Lucy, who saw that things were not progressing at all as she desired, proposed adjourning to the garden.

“Yes, go,” Miss Bretherton said; “it is unnatural for young creatures like you to be spending this sweet summer-time within four walls. I have a letter to send off by this post, but I can finish it in twenty minutes, and then I too shall come out among the lilies, though my days for such wanderings are long since past.”

Muriel was indignant with Lucy for making the move, hotly indignant with good Cousin Helen for her little speech, which meant neither more nor less than the majority of Cousin Helen’s little speeches. They were generally susceptible of a romantic interpretation, if you chose to give it them. But Muriel was in no mood for just and reasonable consideration just then. She slipped round to Lucy’s side and took hold of her arm with a grasp so firm that that wily damsel despaired of making good her escape on any terms, and for half an hour the trio wandered up and down the softly carpeted alleys of the garden, all equally ill at ease. Jack, who

was now quite as anxious for Lucy to second him by retiring judiciously as he had been shortly before to discard what he conceived to be her lead, was almost driven to invent some frivolous excuse for inducing her to go into the house for a moment, when Miss Bretherton's voice broke in to his aid.

“Lucy! Lucy, dear child! Can you tell me where to find the key of the bookcase in my room? I want to look at that volume of Christina Rossetti.” (For your letter by this post, O crafty Cousin Helen?)

Lucy snatched her arm from her sister's with a feeling akin to triumph.

“I have the key in my wardrobe, Cousin Helen; I'll come and get it for you at once. You go, Muriel? What good would that do? The thing's put away in my old key-basket, and where that is, I haven't the smallest notion. It is months ago since I saw it last.”

She sped away on her errand, delighted with her own acuteness in having set Jack at his ease by intimating that her absence would probably be of considerable duration.

Jack and Muriel were left standing together at the end of the garden furthest from the house, a point where all the walks converged in an

expanse of green turf which was neither croquet-lawn nor tennis-court, but simply a genuine old-fashioned bowling-green. It was bounded on two sides by the park palings, and on the third lay a clear pond full of water-lilies.

“Come and look at the lilies. I—I want to show you something,” the young man said, with a tremor in his voice. Muriel went, a little unwillingly, but with that curious thrill she had experienced once before during the evening running through her for a moment.

When they reached the water-side, they both stood silent for a few minutes. Jack had forgotten—if indeed he had ever known—what it was he wanted to show Muriel; but he gazed at her with looks so mutely eloquent that they reached her very heart. At last he said, in low husky tones, “You are really going to-morrow?”

“Yes, by the first train from Northam. I shall have to be up with the dawn to be in time.”

Her voice was not quite so steady as she could have wished. She felt so conscious of her young lover’s love as he stood beside her, that her own heart involuntarily responded to it. She did not really love him, she knew that; but for an instant she could almost have persuaded herself

that she did. Just as a child, carelessly sweeping his hands over the keys of an instrument of whose nature he is ignorant, may now and again accidentally strike some true chord of harmony, so Arlingham had touched a responsive chord in this girl's soul. But it was only by accident; the secrets of the instrument were secrets to him still, nor was his the hand that should ever succeed in drawing them from their hiding-place.

“Are you so very anxious to go?” Jack went on.

“Isn’t it natural that I should be anxious?” Muriel cried, moved to defend herself from the implied reproach. “I have seen so little of the world, and I do long to see something more. Besides, I shall only be away a month, and you all talk as if I were leaving Alderton for years!”

“Would nothing persuade you to give it up?” Jack, instead of going straight to the main point, persisted in fencing with the question. Muriel’s spirit, which had nearly died within her, revived as she perceived his fatal blunder. Instantly there returned upon her the old irresistible desire to turn the conversation, to make it safe and commonplace, anything but romantic and emotional.

"It would have to be something very extraordinary indeed which should persuade me to do so. I don't think anything would stop me short of a sprained ankle, or some other accident which rendered me incapable of moving. Think of getting away from this sultry heat—how hot it is in the garden to-night! we had far better have stayed indoors—getting away to a peak a couple of thousand feet above the sea, and being 'blown crystal clear by Freedom's northern wind'!"

"I don't mean that," answered Jack angrily and incoherently. "I mean, do you really care so much to go? Don't you feel the least regret for those you leave behind?"

"Regret? For those I leave behind?" Muriel repeated ironically. (She had quite recovered now.) "Really, Jack, your tone is tragical. You speak as if I were starting for a distant quarter of the globe, never to return, or lying on my death-bed, surrounded by a sorrowing family, instead of going to Switzerland for a month!"

If at that moment Jack Arlingham had had courage and decision to rebuke the girl he loved for her unseasonable levity, and to tell her in so many plain words of his love, he might perhaps have won her there and then, and the course of

this history would have been altogether altered. But he hesitated, and while he did so, his last chance was gone. Before he quite came to himself in a tumult of pain and disappointment, Muriel was talking gaily of indifferent matters, and he knew that to attempt to guide the conversation into its former channel again was a task wholly beyond him. How either of them got through the trying five minutes which elapsed before Jack despairingly moved to go, neither could have given a clear account; but when Lucy came down at last, pausing discreetly in the hall to take her observations, they were parting—it would seem, very calmly and prosaically—at the front gate.

Perhaps the prosaic calm was more in seeming than reality.

“Good-bye, Jack,” said Muriel, very softly. Her little ebullition of wounded pride was over; the need for self-defence was over too, and she could not bear to part in anger from her old playfellow and friend. “Lucy shall tell you whether her dismal predictions come true or not.”

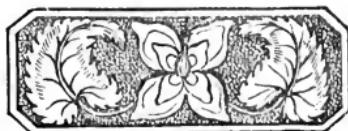
“Good-bye,” Jack answered resentfully. The young man’s heart was hot within him: angry with her, he was still more angry with himself.

“Oh, I have no doubt you will enjoy yourself among the snow-peaks,” he said, with a bitter little laugh.

“Won’t you wish me a safe and happy journey at least?” Muriel pleaded, with tears in her eyes. The girl’s tender heart throbbed compassionately at the look of angry pain in her friend’s face—for, as her friend, Jack was really dear to her. “I am afraid I spoke sharply and flippantly just now—I cannot think what possessed me. Forgive me, Jack, and give me your good wishes.”

“I don’t think my good wishes will help you much,” he began sullenly. Then, with a sudden softening of manner, “Don’t quite forget us all. And perhaps when you come back—dear——”

He uttered his last timid monosyllable almost below his breath, clasping her hand very tightly; paused a second longer; then, as she did not speak or stir, dropped the passive fingers he had been holding, and went silently away.





CHAPTER V.

“ALL ON A SUMMER DAY.”

“Days dawn on us that make amends for many,
Sometimes,
When heaven and earth seem sweeter far than any
Man’s rhymes.”

SWINBURNE.

“MURIEL is certainly a very charming travelling companion,” Professor Erskine remarked to his wife about ten days later. “As a rule, I find sight-seeing with young people a sadly disappointing affair, but with her it is a positive enjoyment. She does not say very much, except to put questions, but every now and then there is a flash of quiet enthusiasm in that expressive face of hers which does a man’s heart good—especially the heart of a *blasé* old traveller like myself. At Cologne the other day I could almost have fancied that thirty years had been wiped out, and that I was showing *you* the cathedral for the first time, wifie.”

Mrs. Erskine blushed like a girl at the implied compliment. She was a tall, slight woman, with a pale, refined face, and a dreamy, absorbed expression not often found on countenances over which fifty years have passed. But the hand of Time had dealt gently with her, leaving but few traces of the passage of half a century on her delicate features. Her husband was fond of noticing the strong resemblance she bore to a bust of the poet Schiller which stood in his study at Oxford. The likeness was undoubted, as far as the outlines went, but no vestige of the strength and purpose stamped upon the marble features of the man appeared in those of the living woman, who looked a complete personification of gentle feminine weakness. There could not well have been found a more striking contrast to the big, broad-shouldered, loose-limbed Scotchman who sat opposite her. With his shock of reddish-yellow hair and beard just beginning to turn grey, his weather-beaten complexion and rugged profile, no one could have called Professor Erskine handsome; but the intellectual power which sat enthroned on his broad forehead and the mingled fire and humour which lit up his light blue eyes amply atoned for the want of mere good looks in a

man of his years. He was rather unconventionally dressed for a clergyman ; and he spoke with a slight Scotch “burr,” which his friends were apt to think only added a piquancy to the manifold charms of his conversation, since, when he could be persuaded to speak at all, Oxford itself could boast no more brilliant and original talker. But except in the society of a few congenial spirits he generally entrenched himself in a fortress of silence. With his wife alone was he always accessible, always expansive ; the other members of his family often jarred upon his taste or humour—for he was above all things what his countrymen call humorsome. His niece Muriel, however, had always been a favourite of his.

“There is another great advantage in lionizing her,” he went on after a moment’s pause, while the faint flush of gratification still lingered in Mrs. Erskine’s thin cheeks ; “she never affects to admire anything she does not really admire, nor does she pretend to understand allusions that are as Greek and Hebrew to her. I have tried her in that way purposely once or twice, and she has stood the test triumphantly.”

“Yes,” Mrs. Erskine answered, “I fancied you were bent on something of the kind at Antwerp

from the remarks I overheard you making to her, and when I saw how pleased you looked as she frankly confessed her ignorance of your drift, I knew I had guessed rightly. As you say, where she does understand fully, she is wonderfully appreciative."

"Marvellously so, I think. I often wonder where the child got the poetry of her nature. Our good brother-in-law Ferrars is a most worthy man, but without a spark of the immortal fire in his composition; and although poor Amy was a good deal like you in some ways, yet she died too early for it to be possible she should have influenced her children intellectually."

"May they not have inherited the faculty?" Mrs. Erskine adventured rather timidly. "Neither of them—none of them, I may say, for in this respect George is like his sisters—take after their father in any one particular. Lucy, of course——"

"Lucy!" interrupted the Professor with profound scorn. "Lucy is of the earth, earthy—a type of the smart, would-be-witty, worldly wise girl of the period—the very type I specially detest. George is an unknown quantity. At present he is merely a clever schoolboy, and no

one can forecast with any certainty what he may turn out in the future. I suspect much will depend on his circumstances and friendships, for I should imagine him to be pliable and easily led. But Muriel is of a different mould. There is a hint of the Thekla character latent in her. I wish, for her sake, that we could have devoted more time to travelling and sight-seeing, but it was impossible."

"Quite impossible," responded the devoted wife, almost scandalized at the mere notion of her idol's plans being disturbed in the smallest particular by so frivolous a consideration as a girl's enjoyment. "And she seems just as happy since we came to the Axenstrasse as she was when we were moving from place to place. The mountains and her books and drawing together content her perfectly."

"I wish there were some congenial souls in the place for her to make friends with," said the Professor kindly. "But of course in a lonely little mountain hotel it would be unreasonable to expect amusing society—the very thing too, by the way, that you and I wanted to avoid. Only I am afraid we hardly considered our young companion sufficiently; it must be trying for a damsel of nineteen to spend the greater portion

of the day in solitude, I would think. I hope she will find means of entertaining herself during our absence to-day," he added.

(This dialogue had been taking place in a railway-carriage on the line between Lucerne and Bâle, to which latter place the Erskines were journeying for a few hours' visit, in order to verify a statement introduced into the Professor's new book by researches into certain documents supposed to exist in the Town Library.)

"I have no doubt she will," replied Mrs. Erskine tranquilly. "Muriel is by no means one of those girls who are necessarily dull or unhappy because they are alone."

Mrs. Erskine was perfectly right. Muriel at that moment was certainly neither dull nor unhappy, though she was quite alone in the simple little sitting-room appropriated to the Erskines' private use at the Hôtel Mythen. It was a room on the first floor, with two windows commanding a fine view of the lake below and the distant mountains on its further side. Into one of these windows Muriel had carried her chair and a little rickety, spindle-legged table which barely held her desk and inkstand, preferring this indifferent writing accommodation combined

with the immediate neighbourhood of the magnificent panorama outside to the solid piece of furniture which did duty for a library table, and whereon were ranged her uncle's books and papers, standing well out of reach of all distracting sights and sounds against the wall. She had apparently found her epistolary labours easy and delightful, for although three closely written sheets of thin foreign paper, together with an envelope addressed to her sister, already lay on the window-seat at her side, her pen was still flying briskly and unflaggingly over the pages of a fourth.

“If it were not for my drawing,” she wrote, “and for the boat Uncle Alec has hired for my own proper and peculiar use, perhaps I might be a little dull at times, for the society here is *nil*, as you predicted it would be. I could have laughed aloud the first day we went down to dinner, and found assembled at the *table d'hôte* the very company you prophetically destined me to meet. I at once recognized the German family (seven in number) on economy intent, and the English lady-tourists; besides these, we had two highly respectable but grotesquely comical-looking Swiss ladies, two or three Dutch gentlemen, and a white-haired lawyer from

Brussels. You will observe that your friend the curate is as yet missing from the list. I don't know if you will consider his place in any way supplied by a solitary Englishman who lives over our heads. Unfortunately we never see this personage, as he has a soul above his fellows, and keeps entirely to his private rooms, avoiding the garden and every other frequented haunt. I fancy he fulfils your conditions as far as making excursions with praiseworthy regularity may be considered to fulfil them, for although he has never yet condescended to show himself dusty and dishevelled in the dining-room at the close of the day, yet I have several times seen from my window a tall figure in a very shabby old shooting-coat swinging itself up the steps of the boat-house just after dark. More of this mysterious individual I cannot tell you, except that when the windows are open I occasionally hear him whistling old German airs, and he whistles in capital tune."

Here the letter branched off in a new direction, that of home affairs—a subject so engrossing that it might very likely have overflowed into a fifth sheet of paper, had not the clock given warning of the approach of the post hour.

Muriel hastily folded, closed, and stamped

her voluminous epistle, donned her shady hat, which was lying close at hand, and ran down into the hall just as the sturdy, stolid Swiss who acted as postal messenger between the Hôtel Mythen and the little town of Brunnen was shouldering his leatheren wallet to depart. Her letter despatched, she wandered out at the wide-open door, through the rustic verandah, down the green slope of turf on which the hotel stood, crossed the broad dusty Axenstrasse lying, a line of dazzling, unendurable whiteness, in the glare of the brilliant August sunshine, and passed through the shady garden on the other side till she reached the edge of the lake itself. There she paused, her lips apart, her eyes softened almost to tears.

“How beautiful it is!” she exclaimed half aloud.

The scene before her was indeed beautiful. Overhead, a sky without a cloud, its deep blue tempered by the silvery haze which tells of intense heat. At her feet, the tranquil waters of the Bay of Uri, blue likewise, but of a paler and more delicate azure than the glowing heavens they reflected, shimmering in the golden radiance with a thousand sparkles and jets and lines of living light. Far away on her left, at the

extreme end of the lake, the white houses of Flüelen set in a framework of green meadows and wooded heights, and the snowy conical peak of the majestic Bristenstock keeping solemn watch and ward over town and valley; on the opposite side of the bay, a prospect of frowning mountains and waving woods, pines and birches feathering down to the water's edge, with the solid granite of the Frohnalp and Güttschenstock rising above them in massive grandeur, and—seen as through a rent in the magnificent rampart—a glimpse of the cold white shoulder of the Uri Rothstock. It was a glorious sight; and the young, fresh, unspoilt soul of the girl rejoiced in it, saddened vaguely at it, fell down in instinctive reverence before it and all it symbolized.

When she had gazed her fill, however, she began to cast about for some means of occupying the long summer evening before her. It was only four o'clock, and, for all her faculty of dreaming and idealizing, Muriel's was essentially a healthy, active nature, which craved employment. She did not care to sit down and read just then, having been busy among her uncle's books all the morning, and she had done writing enough for one day. She was young and strong,

and longed for something in the way of active exercise. A bright thought! She had still three or four hours of daylight before her, and the lake was as smooth as glass. She would take her portfolio and row across to the exquisite little gorge she knew lay opposite, and try her hand at a sketch of the Axenberg from that point. The very idea for such an afternoon! and she ran lightly up the steep incline to the hotel to fetch her drawing materials, eager to put her plan into instant execution.

We talk glibly of the warning voice of presentiment, but unhappily it is a voice seldom heard in the great crises of life. Often at such turning-points of fate how little—oh, how very little!—would have sufficed to check us before we had entered the fatal path, or crossed the fatal bridge on the other side of which awaited us some destiny that we would have given worlds to avoid! But the arresting word remained unuttered, and the step forward taken in ignorance can never be retraced.

Thus Muriel heard no voice at her ear that day insinuating vague alarm or inexplicable hesitation as she prepared to set off on her hastily planned expedition, but merrily tossed her sketching-block into the clumsy boat, and pushed off

gaily into the glimmering sapphire of the sunlit waters. She was fond of rowing and tolerably expert in the use of oars, so, heavy as was her present craft compared with that she had been used to handle on the Thames, she managed to make it travel fairly fast over the smooth waveless expanse, and it was not till she had reached the middle of the lake that she paused to rest, and discovered, on looking idly at the bottom of the boat, that she had left her pencil-case behind. Uttering a little exclamation of impatience at her own forgetfulness, she began to turn the boat round, with the intention of returning to fetch the missing object. But if she did this, she remembered, it would be too late to cross the lake again that evening. Should she give up the excursion for to-day, and content herself with sketching in the garden ?

She hesitated, resting on her oars in indecision, and the boat floated round to its former position. Could she have had a glimpse of the future just then, she would have gone back, perhaps. Even the loss of a pencil-case might have decided the destiny of more than one life, had she chosen to yield to what appeared the leading of accident. But she did not so yield. She went on. The mechanical return of the boat to its original

direction was sufficient to decide her onward course, and she gathered up her oars with vigour and rowed on untiringly until the keel of her little craft grated on the white pebbles of the farther shore. There she secured it to the overhanging branch of a tree, and landed well pleased.

The gorge she had come to visit was quite as beautiful as she had pictured it from the other side. Although its banks were steep, they were not precipitous—well-worn though narrow paths intersected them, and even off the beaten tracks there was safe and easy foothold for any active pedestrian. On both sides they were thickly wooded, the ground being covered with short mossy grass and wild mountain flowers, while along the watercourse below a tiny stream, which in the winter would probably become a brawling, turbid torrent, sweeping all before it, now sang softly as it came leaping, limpid and shallow over its bed of yellow and white pebbles to lose itself in the lake.

Muriel was delighted. Her regret at the loss of her pencils was forgotten; she had no wish to sketch now. She was quite content to wander up and down this enchanting glen, gaining every now and then through the trees lovely glimpses

of the larger world of lake and mountain outside and above it, turning ever with renewed pleasure to the miniature realm of thicket and waterfall within. Tired at last, she threw herself down on the grass beside the stream where it dipped into the bay, and taking out her pocket Schiller, completed the charm of the entrancing solitude by peopling it with the poetic creations of "Wilhelm Tell."

Suddenly she was startled by a distant sound, like yet unlike the note of a bird. Involuntarily she dropped the book on her knee, and raised her head to listen. There again! The sound, very faint and distant at first, was growing more and more distinct, and now she could hear plainly that it was no bird's note, but a human voice, and (alas for romance!) it was whistling. Nearer and nearer it came, till she could distinguish the air of "Die Beiden Grenadiere;" then it ceased abruptly, as a faint cracking of branches and rustling of leaves indicated that the whistler was close at hand.

Muriel looked up, but no one was visible from where she sat. "I wonder if it could be our mysterious Englishman?" she thought to herself. "It sounded very like his whistle." But her speculations were interrupted by the unseen

musician's breaking without warning into full song, in a fine baritone voice which seemed to come from the clouds.

“Gelb rollt mir zu Füssen der brausende Kur
Im tanzenden Wellengetriebe,
Es lächelt die Sonne, mein Herz und die Flur,
O! wenn es doch immer so bliebe!”

he sang. Muriel listened smilingly, for the voice was flexible as well as sonorous, and trolled out Rubinstein's florid melody with practised ease. But the singer was evidently moving away again. The repetition of the refrain was almost lost upon Muriel, though she strained her ears to distinguish it, and before it was ended the vocalist was too far off for her to hear whether he went on to the second verse or ceased altogether.

“How well he sang, whoever he was!” thought the girl to herself. “If it was our next-door neighbour, and not a native-born German, he has an uncommonly good pronunciation. I wish he would have stayed till he had finished his ditty. However, I suppose it is time for me to be moving.”

She looked from the sun, which was getting rather low, to her watch, and found that it was already half-past six, so that an immediate start

homewards was imperative. To spring into the boat and untie the rope which held it fast to the overhanging tree was the work of a couple of moments; Muriel unshipped her oars deftly, and prepared to push off without further delay. But she was not fated to return so easily. The patch of apparently hard sand on which she planted her oar proved treacherously soft and yielding; the oar sank into it to a depth of several inches, and as she strove hastily to release the clumsy implement, it gave an ominous crack and broke short off about a foot above the blade, which remained embedded, leaving only the handle in the girl's grasp. She had the presence of mind to draw the boat close again to land by means of the oar left her, and, having regained *terra firma* herself, to secure it by clutching the line. Then she stood still, with the rope in her hand, to reflect on her predicament.

It was not altogether a pleasant one, for it was growing late, later than she would have chosen in any case for her homeward row, had she been more observant of the flight of time. Her return across the lake was rendered impossible, unless she could get some one either to convey her over, or to lend her an oar, and there was not a single *châlet*, much less a village, in sight

on any side. Muriel was constitutionally fearless, but she began to feel slightly uncomfortable, and a little less enthusiastic in her appreciation of the delights of solitary excursions by water than she had been five minutes earlier. Still, there was no use wasting time in vain regrets or unpleasant anticipations ; it was needful to act, and act at once.

“Let me see,” she reflected : “if I go to the right, I must come at last to Flüelen ; if I go to the left, to Treib. As long as I keep to the lake I cannot go wrong ; and there will be an early moon to-night, fortunately. I only hope they will not get home before I do, and be alarmed at finding me away. I wonder,” she exclaimed aloud in her perplexity, as she looked on either side of her, “which is nearest, Flüelen or Treib ?”

“I beg your pardon, but you seem to have met with an accident to your boat. Can I be of any assistance to you ?” said a man’s voice just above her.

Muriel started round, half frightened by the friendly accents that seemed to fall from the clouds, but she recovered herself and her composure instantly. There was indeed nothing to be frightened at. The words were courteous, the

accent unmistakably that of an Englishman and a gentleman—and there was the speaker himself, a tall dark man in the inevitable light shooting jacket of the British tourist, coming down the path behind her.

"Excuse me," he began again, lifting his hat, "I am afraid I have startled you. But I fancied you had met with a mishap, in which case I might possibly be of use. Can I help you in any way?"

"Thank you; you are very kind," Muriel answered. "I have been unlucky enough to break one of my oars, and I have not an idea where to go in search of such a thing. Perhaps you could direct me?"

"I am afraid I can't do that, for I am quite ignorant whether there are any habitations within reasonable walking distance or not. But—may I ask where you are staying?"

"At the Hôtel Mythen, just opposite."

Muriel spoke a little disconsolately now. Her new acquaintance seemed likely to prove less helpful than he had at first sight promised to be.

"At the Mythen?" he repeated. "Then there is no difficulty whatever, for I am staying there too, and can row you across. My boat is on the other side of the gorge; I will go and fetch

it immediately. We can tie this one on behind."

"Thank you exceedingly," said the girl simply and gratefully. "I am very sorry to give you so much trouble—but it is too late to start on a journey of discovery, so I must accept your kind offer. Only I regret putting you to such inconvenience."

"It is no inconvenience, no trouble at all." There was something more than mere politeness, there was real kindness in the tone, Muriel thought. "I shall be as quick as I can, but it will take me some little time, I'm afraid, to reach my boat and bring her round to this place—the path is a very winding one. However, there is an hour and a half's daylight yet remaining. You will not be alarmed?"

"No, indeed," Muriel answered, half laughing at the idea. "Now that, thanks to your kindness, I have the means of getting home within reach, I feel quite at ease. Pray do not hurry: I shall not mind waiting in the least."

So saying, she seated herself composedly on a fragment of rock, while her newly acquired friend dashed up the side of the glen at a pace which augured well for his speedy return.



CHAPTER VI.

FROM SUNSET TO MOONRISE.

“Then, how grace a rose? I know a way:
Leave it rather.”

R. BROWNING.

IT was not, however, quite so speedy as she had expected, and she had plenty of time to indulge in speculations concerning her timely rescuer's identity.

He was “the Englishman overhead,” undoubtedly, but this was rather a vague and unsatisfactory definition. Muriel had never heard his name, and she felt that she should be puzzled to guess his possible calling or profession. He was not a clergyman, nor a country gentleman—of this much she felt sure; no, nor yet a soldier, nor a doctor, nor a *savant*. A literary man, then, or an artist? Either of these, possibly; but if the latter, would not his dress have

inclined a little more to the picturesque? Perhaps, though, he was some really great painter, who disdained all petty affectations. If he should turn out to be Sir Frederick Leighton or Mr. Long, or some other equally famous light in the artistic firmament, Muriel felt she should be ready to rejoice in her adventure. On reflection, however, he could not be the bearer of either of those celebrated names; his age settled that question out of hand. He was evidently a man still in the prime of life; probably about six and thirty, Muriel decided. Perhaps he was not an artist, after all. Mature consideration, indeed, suggested that he looked much more like a distinguished member of Parliament: say a rising statesman belonging to some patrician Whig family. He would be just the right age for that. And if he were a Secretary of State, why, his voluminous correspondence—Muriel had noticed that his knapsack and his pockets seemed filled to overflowing with papers—and his long mornings of retirement would be alike accounted for.

This hypothesis pleased Miss Ferrars so much that she set her mind instantly to work trying to recall the names and approximate ages of the Ministers in office, whether of Cabinet rank or not. Without the friendly aid of a "Who's

Who?" it proved a laborious task, and occupied so much time that the minutes stole away unperceived. Muriel was still hunting the inmost recesses of her memory for a missing Under-Secretary when a boat shot round the little promontory formed by the right bank of the gorge, and the gentleman whose appearance had given rise to so much speculation greeted her by exclaiming, "I am indeed sorry to have kept you waiting such an unconscionable time!"

"Pray do not mention it," said Muriel hurriedly. She spoke with rather less than her usual composure, her colour heightening a little as she did so. "You are very kind to take so much trouble at all. Am I to get in?" she inquired, as the subject of her meditations paused with one foot on shore and the boat-line in hand.

"Not for a moment, please. If you don't mind giving me the line of the other boat, I think I can tie it on so that it will follow us safely. There!" he ejaculated after the lapse of two or three minutes, when she had silently complied with his request and watched him deftly knotting the two ropes together, "I think that is perfectly secure. Now your things"—turning with a sudden abrupt movement towards Muriel's belongings, which lay in a heap under

the rock—"a shawl, book, a portfolio—is that all? Then I think we may start"—holding out his hand to assist her into the boat; and Muriel, as she just touched it in passing, noticed the long, slender fingers, "the true artistic hand," she said to herself, feeling half inclined to return to her earliest surmise.

Her cavalier unshipped his oars and pushed off. Taking his seat opposite the girl, he demanded, "May I ask if you are very anxious to get back as quickly as possible? because, if so, I will put on as much pace as I can. Will your friends be alarmed at your absence?"

"No, happily," replied Muriel, feeling quite at her ease again, and unconsciously flattered by the deferential courtesy of her companion's manner. "They have gone to Bâle for the day, and I do not expect them back till late to-night. My fear was that I might not be able to get home before dark, but I suppose we shall manage that now?"

"Easily," was the answer; "and as your people will not be looking out for you, we may venture to travel at an ordinary rate. You see," he added, with a half-smile, as he struck out into a long workmanlike stroke which seemed very swift to Muriel after her own short girlish row-

ing, "I am hardly equipped for a row at racing speed; but if you had had parents watching for you on the other side, I should have felt bound to do all I knew. It is not fair to keep any one in that kind of suspense if it can possibly be avoided."

"I hope you will not hurry yourself at all on my account," returned Muriel. "I am sorry to think I have burdened you with this extra boat as well as with myself, but I cannot help feeling very thankful you happened to come my way. Considering how lonely the place is, I was most fortunate, I think."

"I am very glad to have been there," he answered gravely; and then followed a silence of several minutes, broken only by the even sweep of the oars and the soft ripple of the water washing against the sides of the boat. Muriel profited by it to steal some surreptitious glances of inquiry at her nameless *vis-à-vis*, and recognized, on nearer scrutiny, that he was considerably older than her first hasty inspection had led her to suppose. The active figure and the thick dark hair untouched with grey might indeed have belonged to a young man, but the keen face opposite her had parted with the freshness of youth years ago.

“How fast the light is fading!” she observed presently, feeling that the silence had lasted long enough. “It is almost twilight already.”

“Yes, these August evenings are provokingly short. If you look back at that glen we have just left, you will see that it must be getting tolerably dark there.”

Muriel glanced behind her, gave a little shiver, and said, “I am glad I am not wandering there disconsolately at this moment.”

“But you would not have been there,” returned her companion, with a faint gleam of amusement in his face. “You were resolute, I think, in your determination to find your way to Flüelen or Treib, and were only debating which to make for, weren’t you? You must excuse my having played the part of an eavesdropper, by the way; the offence was quite involuntary on my part, I assure you.”

“I am not sure that I should have improved matters much if I had started on that adventurous walk,” Muriel replied, “except that I should have been trying to do something. That is always better than sitting down and despairing.”

“Always, under all circumstances”—with a sudden energy which surprised her. “It is

always better to occupy 'one's mind, and defy the despair, whatever it may be. Pardon me," he added in a more measured tone, "I am quite aware that I transgress in speaking; but such distant solitary expeditions are really rather dangerous—at least, for you. Unless you have a companion, it would be wiser to keep near home."

He spoke with a certain air of authority, as of one accustomed to have his advice respectfully received; and Muriel resented this by flushing slightly and replying with more reserve of manner than she had previously thought necessary to adopt.

"I am not at all timid," she said, "and I am thoroughly accustomed to boating. I have frequently rowed on the Thames—not in a heavy tub like this, but in a light sculling-boat—and I was always considered quite competent to take care of myself. Then of course on the Thames you have to consider the currents, but no one ever thought there was any danger for me."

She stopped, feeling she had shown rather more eagerness than the occasion demanded, but terribly anxious lest her new acquaintance should take upon himself to remonstrate with the Professor on the propriety of her boating

any more alone. She thought he looked capable of it.

“Very likely,” was the provokingly cool and unmoved rejoinder. “But, you see, on a solitary excursion everything does not depend on watermanship. When an oar breaks, for instance, and you are miles from home? On the Thames it would generally be comparatively easy to supply the deficiency or get home some other way, but here——”

Muriel laughed and interrupted half angrily, “That was an accident, and one not likely to be repeated, I hope.”

His face darkened. “I hope not, either,” he answered, in a tone plainly implying that this self-willed maiden need not look to his gracious intervention a second time for deliverance from the consequences of her rashness. Evidently he chose to take Muriel’s fervently expressed aspiration for immunity from such mishaps in future as a veiled desire that she might not again be troubled with his society. Inexperienced as she was, she perceived the false step she had made, and being genuinely distressed at having given offence to a stranger who had shown her such unsolicited kindness, she hastened to try and repair it.

“This time, at any rate,” she remarked shyly, “I have not suffered for my temerity, thanks to you.” Then wishing to vary the subject of conversation, and seizing on the first topic which presented itself to her mind, she asked, “Did you know I was English before you spoke to me just now, or did you merely speak in English without thinking?”

“I heard you speak first, remember,” he answered, his brow clearing, and the faint gleam of humour crossing his face again, “so there was no room left for doubt. But in any case I should have felt sure of your nationality,” he continued, coolly perusing the fair face opposite him with his penetrating dark eyes, as if it had been a picture held out for his inspection, and noting its delicate outlines with pleasure. “Yours is an English face; a high type of the race, certainly, but possessing its characteristics, nevertheless. The colouring *might* be Italian; but, no—I don’t think I could have been deceived.”

He spoke with such quiet assurance, and such apparent unconsciousness of having given utterance to anything that could be construed into a compliment, that Muriel could find no excuse for resenting his speech. Nevertheless, it embarrassed her slightly.

“Now I think of it,” he resumed, after a moment’s pause, during which Muriel looked just a trifle uncomfortable and her companion very much at his ease—perhaps, to tell the truth, he rather enjoyed the situation—“I am sure I must have seen you before, though only in the twilight and at a considerable distance. Don’t you sometimes walk in the garden with your father after dinner?”

“Yes,” smiled Muriel, “but not with my father. It must have been my uncle, Professor Erskine, whom you saw with me.”

“Professor Erskine? Not Erskine of Oriel, the Professor of Comparative Mythology at Oxford?”

“The very same,” answered the Professor’s niece with pardonable pride.

“Ah, then I have the pleasure of knowing him a little. If I had seen him by daylight since he came here I should of course have recognized him instantly. We have met one another several times in town; and, in fact, I heard him read a very able paper at a meeting of the Royal Society not a fortnight ago. And I have dined with him once or twice at Balliol, and had some little talk with him afterwards.”

“That is indeed curious,” replied Muriel. “I

have no doubt he will be very glad to renew his acquaintance——” She hesitated suddenly, recollecting that her uncle had registered a solemn vow to renew acquaintance with no man during his stay in Switzerland. “So you know Oxford ?” she inquired with interest, escaping as she best could from the dilemma in which this awkward prick of memory had placed her.

“Yes, I know it pretty well,” was the reply. “I am a Cambridge man myself—Oxford does not offer quite the same advantages to intending members of my profession in some ways—but I have a young brother resident there, Fellow and tutor of his college, in fact, and I run down every now and then to spend a day with him. It is one of the most charming places to be found anywhere in the spring and early summer. In the winter I should fancy it would be rather cold and damp. Don’t you find it so, Miss Erskine ?”

“I have never been there in the winter,” the girl answered with that irrational feeling of annoyance common to every human being when addressed by a name that does not belong to them. “I don’t live at Oxford, I only stay there occasionally; my home is in Holmshire. And I am not an Erskine, by the way,” she

added, with what she flattered herself was an air of easy unconcern. "I am *Mrs. Erskine's* niece, in reality ; my mother was her sister, and my name is Muriel Ferrars." After this confidence, she thought her interlocutor might as well reveal his identity also, and even vouchsafe to explain what he meant by that tantalizing phrase, "members of my profession." But having acquired all the information he desired to gain himself, he did not seem inclined to impart any. Perhaps he liked playing the part of *l'ami inconnu* a little while longer.

"What a beautiful name !" he murmured half to himself—audibly enough, however, to be distinctly heard by Muriel. Then aloud : "I beg your pardon ; I leapt too hastily to a conclusion from your saying you were Professor Erskine's niece. I trust he is quite well ? He is recruiting after the labours of the Easter term, I suppose ?"

"Well," Muriel said laughingly, "one can scarcely call it recruiting. I should rather say he was trying whether a change of work could be made to take the place of rest and recreation this vacation. He is bringing out a new edition of his book on the Neo-Platonists, with a second preface and additional notes—in fact, there is

quite a mass of fresh material to be worked in with the old. And as his doctor said he really ought to have change of air, he thought he would come here and combine the change with quiet for his work."

"A capital plan"—rather mischievously—"but a little monotonous at times for you, I should think."

"Well—it leaves me a good deal to myself, certainly, for my aunt helps Professor Erskine in his work, whatever it may be, and very rarely leaves him. That must be my excuse for the solitary expeditions you seem to think so dangerous. But I don't find it dull. We did a good deal of sight-seeing on our way here, which has given me plenty to think about, and I have by no means got tired of the Vierwaldstättersee yet. How beautiful it is!"

"Beautiful indeed," said Muriel's companion, observing with admiring approval the flush of girlish enthusiasm which overspread her cheeks as she spoke. "Look round you for a moment now," he added.

Muriel complied. The sun had nearly set behind the western mountains, and a few lingering rays of burnished gold were all that remained of his actual presence, but a halo of fiery crimson

marked his setting-place and gave promise of a morrow as bright as the day now closing. Immediately overhead, two or three fleecy clouds tinged with a soft shade of pink hung almost immovable, and the distant east was lit up with a complete fairy symphony of colour, faint but none the less lovely reflection of the ruddier splendours of the west—such green and rose-colour and saffron hues as might drive even a Turner to despair. The snowy slopes of the Uri Rothstock glowed with a warm effulgence caught from the ruby light above them, while in the shadow his darker and sterner brethren, the Frohnlalp and Gütschenstock, loomed lofty and mysterious in their robes of mist purple almost to blackness. The little glen that had been so bright and sunny two short hours before was now plunged in impenetrable darkness, but through a fissure in the rocks which bordered it on the southern side a single ray from the fast-sinking sun fell like a flash of glory on the water lying in its shadow, and transmuted it suddenly into a sheet of gold. The old allegory of light and darkness—illustrated by one of Nature's most exquisite dissolving views.

“I have never seen it so lovely as this before,” Muriel said in a subdued voice as she turned back.

“ You are exactly placed for the sunset,” was the response. “ I doubt, if you were on some great height at this moment, whether you would not lose in detail as much as you would gain by a more extended view. To-night all the conditions are perfect, and you looked up just at the right moment. I was waiting till the climax arrived to direct your attention to the sky. Did you see what a cave of blackness that pretty little cañon you were exploring this afternoon has become ? ”

“ Yes, I noticed it,” Muriel answered, shivering again. The rapid transformation of the sunny spot which had so won her fancy into a gloomy chasm of the hills affected her imagination in a strange and inexplicable manner.

“ You are cold, I am afraid,” said the supposed Secretary of State. “ Surely you had a wrap of some kind ? Ah ! here it is. Now don’t move ” —with an imperious gesture—“ I can reach it easily ; ” and, suiting the action to the word, he rose, caught up the garment, and stepping warily towards Muriel, that young damsel found herself cloaked without having had time to protest or demur. She was just realizing the fact of her companion’s height as he stood towering over her, and beginning to falter in her astonishment

a few words of rather unwilling acknowledgment of his attention, when he retired as precipitately as he had advanced, and betook himself to his oars again.

“Is this your first visit to Switzerland, Miss Ferrars?” he asked after a while.

“My very first. I have been abroad several times before, but only in Paris and Germany, so the scenery here is quite new to me.”

“You ought to see Chamounix and Interlaken and the Engadine before you go back, then; but I suppose Professor Erskine does not care to give up much of his time to travelling?”

Muriel shook her head. “He won’t leave this place till he has finished the work he came here to do. After that, perhaps, I might persuade him, if there is time enough left before he has to return to Oxford—he always likes to be in residence a week before term begins—to go a little further afield. He said something yesterday about taking me to the Italian lakes for a fortnight, if he could manage it. That would be delightful; I think I should prefer it even to Chamounix or Interlaken. You know them, I suppose—the Italian lakes?”

It might have been fancy, but it seemed to Muriel, that something very like a spasm of angry pain passed over the face opposite her.

“Yes, I know them”—after a minute’s pause—“but I have not been there for some years—a good many years, in fact; and I dare say they may be altered in some respects, perhaps not for the better. Probably many of the towns may have grown larger and so lost some of their former beauty; but I cannot tell you positively—it is so long since I was there.” He spoke at random, as if his words were not following the current of his thoughts, but were uttered mechanically while his mind was engaged in working out some mental problem wholly distinct from the subject of conversation.

“My uncle was afraid the lakes might be too hot in September,” Muriel adventured next. “Do you think we should find them so? I believe the autumn is hardly the best time for them, but it seems such a pity to have Como and Lugano almost within a stone’s throw, just across the St. Gotthard, and to miss seeing them after all on account of a little heat.”

“Como?” he echoed. “Certainly it would be a great pity to miss seeing Como, if it is at all possible. I don’t know the place, except in the spring season, so of course I am not a very good judge; but from what I have been told, I think you would find the heat in September quite

bearable." This utterance was delivered in the same random manner, with a curious contraction of the eyes which had struck Muriel as resulting from her first introduction of the topic, so she let it drop, seeing that it was for some reason or other an unwelcome one, and the boat swept on for a while again in silence. At length her new acquaintance, shaking off the abstraction which had crept over him, exclaimed : "What a sky ! It is just such a one as I have seen sometimes in South America."

The sunset flush had almost entirely faded by this time, and the whole expanse of sky was of that indescribable shade of colour which is as much green as blue, melting towards the horizon into a pearly grey. Although it was still tolerably light, a few faint stars were beginning to twinkle in the vault overhead, and the rising disk of the harvest moon already cast its beams on the wooded sides of the frowning range of heights they were rapidly approaching. The night promised to be as serene as the day had been splendid.

"In South America ! Then you have been there ?" said Muriel, after a prolonged gaze upwards. "I remember you spoke of a cañon just now."

“ It was rather a misnomer in that case, I fear. The wild vast South American cañons would hardly acknowledge that miniature glen even as a distant relation. Yes, I have travelled a good deal in America, both North and South, in times gone by—when I was not so busy a man as I am now. Of late years I have had to content myself with a short holiday nearer home, or perhaps with none at all.”

This was all decidedly confirmatory of the rising statesman theory.

“ It is a beautiful country, or assemblage of countries, South America,” continued the traveller who had visited it; “ but one soon tires of it. All that tropical magnificence becomes very wearisome to the eye after a few months, or even weeks, and one longs for the infinite variety of Europe. This is far better.”

They were gliding into the tiny boat-house attached to the hotel garden as he spoke, and Muriel’s little excursion was at an end. As she stepped on shore, she summoned all her courage for a direct effort to pierce the mystery in which her escort had hitherto seen fit to shroud his identity.

“ I cannot thank you enough for your great kindness,” she said warmly; then, with a secret

aspiration that the Professor might not prove intractable and decline to "see the fellow" on any terms, she added, "My uncle will, I am sure, be greatly obliged to you too. You have met him before, so may I tell him to whom I am indebted?" She stopped in trepidation at her own temerity.

"I am delighted to have been of any use," was the reply. "My name is Wentworth—pray give my compliments to Professor Erskine. I hope you have not taken cold—if I had been speaking with authority, I should have pronounced that cloak to be hardly warm enough for a boating wrap. But fortunately there is very little breeze."

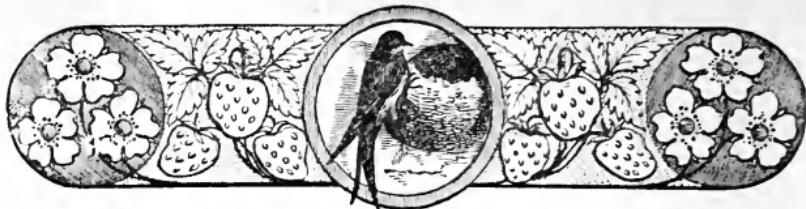
"I do not feel at all chilly, thank you. Good night," answered Muriel, frankly giving her hand. Wentworth—Wentworth? Neither among political celebrities nor royal academicians could she recall such a name. She turned away feeling utterly baffled in all her conjectures.

The bearer of the name in question paused a moment before securing the two boats in their places, to watch the light figure flitting upwards through the dusky garden.

"She has a sweet face," was his unspoken comment, as he returned to his task, "and quite

the look of a girlish Beatrice at times. Very charming manners too; the way in which she accepted my offer to row her back was perfect. It was a pretty little adventure altogether. However, I saw she looked upon me with the eyes of an Evelyn Hope—‘fellow mortals, but nought beside’—considered me solely from the fatherly point of view, and so felt quite at her ease. Well! better so, perhaps. It would be a shame to engage in even the most harmless flirtation with such a child; she would be sure to take mere sport *au grand sérieux*.”





CHAPTER VII.

A NEW EXPERIENCE.

“O brave new world,
That has such people in ‘t!”

SHAKESPEARE.

“REMEMBER him?” quoth the Professor, as he helped himself to a second slice of toast. “Certainly I remember him very distinctly. A tall slim fellow with very dark eyes—and carried his head like a stag. Rather remarkable-looking altogether; not the kind of man one would fail to recognize after seeing him even once. And I have seen him some half-dozen times, all told—perhaps more.”

Professor Erskine was breakfasting in good earnest before entering on the labours of a fresh day, which may account for the spasmodic nature of his utterances. The best part of his attention was plainly given to some excellent

lake-trout before him ; he only bestowed such remains and fragments of it as he could conveniently spare upon the hero of Muriel's adventure on the preceding evening.

"I thought him an uncommonly brilliant fellow," continued Mr. Erskine ; "oh, very brilliant indeed. Quite a phenomenal intellect—sharp and strong at once, like a finely tempered steel blade. He carried those two qualities of sharpness and strength in his face, if I mistake not. (Muriel, my dear, I shall trouble you to pass me the salt.) I have a prejudice, perhaps an unreasonable one, against men of his profession in general, but I always admired Wentworth. He is so totally unlike the tribe of clever advocates, who as a rule appear to me to be cast in one unvarying mould, mental and moral. I can usually tell what a specimen of that order will say on certain subjects, and very nearly how he will say it, before I even set eyes upon him. Now, Wentworth deals in surprises. I don't mean intentional surprises—he never struck me as artificial or melodramatic—but his nature is original and he cannot help showing it. Perhaps I should rather say he has not chosen to let his originality be crushed by the weight of his forensic learning, but has had the courage to be

a man *per se*. There may be profounder lawyers at the Bar than Wentworth, but I doubt if in point of genuine talent there is a man among the younger generation of barristers who can touch him. All the same, I expect he would prove a failure on the Bench. Either the ermine would prove too stifling a wear for him, and reduce his mind to the ordinary judicial level, or his native audacity would break out in some unconventional fashion, and set all his learned brothers trembling for the dignity of their order."

The Professor chuckled modestly over his own joke, and applied himself vigorously to his coffee-cup.

"He is a lawyer?" Muriel exclaimed in astonishment.

"Most assuredly he is, and a very distinguished lawyer too—one of the most distinguished men at the English Bar. In addition, he has a reputation which may fairly be called world-wide as an international jurist. How surprised you look, Thekla!" (This was the Professor's pet appellation for his favourite niece.)

"I am surprised, Uncle Alec. When I was speculating on Mr. Wentworth's probable profession yesterday, I decided that, among other impossibilities, he could not possibly be a lawyer."

"You confirm my view of his personality then," returned Mr. Erskine, "but I wonder you have not heard of him before."

"I don't think I ever did. In what way is he so clever, Uncle Alec? What has he done?"

"If you ask me what he has done, I must refer you to the newspapers and legal records, for of course his greatest triumphs have been won in Westminster Hall; and I don't profess to have gone very deeply into his pet subject of International Law. But he has a pretty taste in art and literature, where I can follow him better, and I should certainly gather from his non-professional talk and writing that he is a man of very unusual gifts. He happened to choose a legal career, and he has succeeded marvellously; but he would have succeeded equally well in half a dozen others for which he was at least quite as well fitted."

"Then Mr. Wentworth writes?" Muriel asked in an awestruck tone.

"Yes, he writes a good deal—chiefly on scientific or purely literary subjects as a rule," said Mrs. Erskine, joining for the first time in the conversation. "Are you sure you never heard of him, dear?"

"Never, Aunt Isabel. You see, I have been so

little in London, or in society at all as yet, that I know nothing about any one, excepting people whose names are constantly in the papers."

"Paul Wentworth's name is mentioned there pretty often, I fancy," remarked the Professor, with a flourish of the bread-knife. "In many ways he is quite one of our men of light and leading, and he does not repose himself upon his early laurels. He evidently considers it the duty of a leader to keep his place in the van of progress, so he is often before the public in one capacity or another."

"Well, I must plead my youth and lack of general information as an excuse for such shameful ignorance," said Muriel merrily. "It is the only one I have to offer."

"A very sufficient one," answered the Professor; "and as you have made Mr. Wentworth's acquaintance, you can easily make up for your deficiency of information touching the facts of his past history by inducing him to relate them to you at first hand. I have no doubt he will be quite ready to impart the tale. I have noticed that he has a very good opinion of himself, like most of these young fellows in the present day."

"Surely," Muriel said questioningly, "you

would not call Mr. Wentworth young? I don't mean that he is old, of course"—with an apologetic air—"but I never thought of him for a moment as a young man."

"Ah, to you!" returned Professor Erskine, with an expressive gesture of indulgent condescension highly irritating to the youthful mind. "Let me see, how old are you, Muriel? Eighteen, nineteen? Well, Wentworth might number years enough to own a daughter of your age, and still be reckoned a comparatively young man. Perhaps, however, he may be rather older than I imagined or recollect at first. I believe we have been in the same room on semi-public occasions once or twice lately, but it is several years since we met each other face to face, and if you don't see a man, you forget how time has sped with him. I caught myself, only last night, thinking of poor Jamie MacDonald—him that went out to Sydney in '47, you will be recollecting, Belle, my dear—as a fresh-coloured lad with yellow curls. Doubtless by this time he is a worn, grizzled old fellow like myself. But what a handsome laddie he used to be; and how bright and hopeful he looked when I saw him last! Ah, well, his has been 'a tale not new, nor joyful, but a common tale,' I fear. And how

he despised me in the days lang syne for having no ambition beyond my books!"

The Professor, who had brought his meal to a conclusion some minutes before, sat on with one arm leaning over the back of his chair, lost for a moment or two in a rush of memories and associations which softened every harsh and unlovely line in his rugged Scotch face; and his wife's countenance caught his altered expression, and reflected it like a faithful mirror. She did not speak; the entire sympathy between her and her husband needed no vehicle of words for its conveyance from heart to heart. She simply smiled at him; and a close observer might have noted a suspicion of tears in her faded blue eyes. But the girl on her right hand was not observing her closely. This sudden divergence from the former subject of conversation to unintelligible reminiscences of obscure persons—unknown, and therefore, from her point of view, uninteresting—provoked and disappointed her. Mr. Wentworth was the living interest of the hour; why could not the Professor continue to discuss him, instead of flying off at a tangent about this tiresome Mr. James Macdonald, who was evidently no credit to his friends? It really was very annoying that whenever Mr. Erskine, in his family circle

at least, happened to state any general proposition, the examples he adduced to illustrate it should be so apt to divert his flow of talk into some fresh channel leading anywhere but in the direction which his mind appeared to be taking originally. Muriel felt indignantly that he would not venture to ramble on in this inconsequent fashion in Balliol common-room, or elsewhere among his male acquaintance. Why should she, his niece, be so treated? She determined on a desperate effort to recall his wandering thoughts.

“Do you know,” she said (in what she herself felt to be a rather over-bright and incisive manner), “what I did suppose Mr. Wentworth to be at first sight, Uncle Alec?”

She watched the effect of her interposition with anxiety. Would the Professor remain, as he sometimes did, sunk in the half-pleasant, half-melancholy abstraction which had seized upon him, and which his devoted helpmate would never have dreamt of disturbing by a word? Would he, as was his habit on other occasions, go on with his own topic of interest, wholly regardless of the query addressed to him; or would he be persuaded for once to resume the dropped thread of his former discourse? To her

delight, he awoke from his reflective dream, and replied at once to her question.

“Oh, you had a theory about him, had you?” he said banteringly. “You are exactly the kind of girl to go about the world fitting caps to heads, my dear Thekla. Let us hear if this one is a tolerable fit.”

“On the contrary, it is a ludicrous misfit, I am afraid. I made up my mind that he was a distinguished M.P., and probably a Cabinet Minister.”

“Upon my word, a very dignified top-knot! Wentworth need feel no resentment at its imposition. I think I would tell him of it when I see him, but that I should be sorry to feed his conceit any fatter than it is at present.”

The Professor laughed good-humouredly, while Muriel was conscious of a feeling of unreasonably strong satisfaction that he should, by his last words, have implied some intention of making an exception to his rigid rule of abstention from the society of his fellow-countrymen in the case of Mr. Wentworth.

“I am surprised,” continued the speaker, after having his laugh out, “at your assigning Wentworth so grand a part in the drama of life. From the disparaging manner in which you dismissed

his claims to youth just now, I concluded he had not impressed you very favourably." (Which conclusion showed that the Professor, however acute he might be as a metaphysician, was not keenly alive to the peculiarities of maidens in their teens.) "Yours is not a bad idea, after all; we may see it realized some day, perhaps. I fancied three years ago that Wentworth had a hankering after political life. He seemed rather contemptuous of legal honours and rewards, and in spite of your unflattering judgment, Muriel, he is young enough to enter on a new career with good prospect of success. As to money, he must have made a considerable fortune already."

"Perhaps he has a family for whom to lay up further treasure," suggested Mrs. Erskine. "Is he married, Alec?"

"I am sure I don't know," replied her husband with an air of perplexity, rumpling his parti-coloured locks into hopeless confusion. "I have met him more than once at mixed parties, but no Mrs. Wentworth appeared on the scene, nor did I ever hear that such a lady was in existence." (The worthy Professor's knowledge of the world of London society was of a very limited order, as may be observed.) "I fancy Wentworth must be a bachelor—or he may have married young,

possibly, and been left early a widower. I know nothing of his private history, nor of his antecedents, beyond the fact of his being a Cambridge man. I dare say your cousin Noel Johnstone could tell you all about him, Belle, if you are curious on the subject."

"I am not in the least curious," Mrs. Erskine rejoined in her most impassive manner.

Which reply was very provoking to Muriel, who would have been ready to put Mr. Noel Johnstone through a searching cross-examination on the spot, could she have had the opportunity of an interview with that estimable Fellow of Trinity. This privilege being denied her, she was fain to content herself with her uncle's desultory remarks. He went on, warming to the subject of his discourse :

"Probably Wentworth has made a bride of his ambition. He is a very ambitious fellow, that has always been plain to me. He is quite aware of his own talents, and I will not say values them unduly, but at any rate values them fully, and can estimate correctly to the uttermost farthing the interest such capital should bring him in. He is not a pottering old bookworm like me"—here Mrs. Erskine shook her head in affectionate depreciation of this self-depreciatory utterance—

“but a man of energy and enterprise, who loves—quite naturally—to shine in the world, as he is very well fitted to do. And why on earth should not he?” demanded the Professor argumentatively, as if one of his patient auditors had advanced some proposition to the contrary. “Why not, I say? If a man knows all the light he can give out will never exceed the illuminating power of a miserable farthing candle, of course he had better hide his modest lamp under a decent bushel of humility; but if he feels himself capable of shedding real radiance, in Heaven’s name let him shine! The business of a star is to give light. And would you have such a man brighten the world for his fellow-men, imagining himself a useless dark globe all the while? The thing is impossible. No man ever taught or benefited humanity unconsciously; and a healthily constituted mind will always feel its own powers without dwelling on them more than is fit and needful.” The orator paused, not for tokens of assent or applause, which he neither required nor expected, but simply to take breath after his outburst of indignation against an imaginary opponent; then he resumed in more measured accents the tenor of his oration. “Wentworth’s ambition would be

specially useful to him in a public career," he said; "useful after a peculiar fashion. In the majority of cases it acts as a spur, but in his it would be a curb to keep him from running his head against stone walls. He has the elements of recklessness in him, but his ambition would probably save him from anything outrageously desperate and unconventional. Don't look so scornfully superior, Muriel. Of course you think every member of the national legislature should be actuated only by pure patriotism. I thought so once too, my child; but I have learnt to my cost that we must reckon with the world as it is, and not as we would have it. However, there are some noble fellows who realize, or very nearly realize, one's ideals—but they are few in number, Thekla, very few. Well," he added more cheerfully, rousing himself from the melancholy abstraction into which he seemed inclined to sink again, "I think we must break up this conference. We must to work, my dear Isabel; you have the paper of notes we made yesterday down here, have you not?" He led the way into the next room. "If you will turn to Book III., page seventy-one, tenth line, 'Porphyry'"—

He had forgotten Muriel's presence and Wentworth's existence as completely as if both were denizens of another planet.

The girl betook herself to her old refuge in the garden, and spent all the hours of the long summer morning there. She held a book in her hand most of the time, but it is doubtful whether she actually read half a dozen pages. To begin with, the day was very hot, and therefore unfavourable to any kind of mental exertion, while the volume Muriel had brought with her to the lake-side was rather abstruse, requiring something of a mental effort to discover and enjoy its obscure beauties. Then the scene before her was so lovely—she found her eyes wandering continually from the printed page in the calf-covered volume to the exquisite poem written in lines of light on the sleeping lake at her feet and its surrounding rampart of guardian heights. And as her eyes travelled from peak to peak, her thoughts half-unconsciously traversed again the brief history of her yesterday's adventure. She must have been a little excited at the time, she supposed, or else why should every word of the desultory and apparently unimportant talk which passed between herself and Mr. Wentworth have become indelibly impressed upon her memory? She found herself treating her uncle's statements and remarks at breakfast that morning as a kind of commentary upon the original text of this con-

versation, and trying to elucidate the latter by their light. Finally, she fell to wondering whether she should have any opportunity of verifying the conclusions at which, upon these somewhat meagre data, she had arrived. Would the interesting person whose acquaintance she had made in so unconventional a manner stay much longer at the Hôtel Mythen? Very likely not; he had been there five days already, and the place was not calculated for a lengthened sojourn. Even if he did remain some little time longer, and Professor Erskine continued in his present amiable and sociable frame of mind, it would be a difficult task to bring the two men together. Mr. Wentworth had hitherto scrupulously avoided all the other inmates of his temporary abode, and never showed himself in any public room or frequented spot out of doors; while as to the Professor, now that he had entered again with redoubled zeal on his work, and allowed himself to become absorbed in Messrs. Porphyry and Co., as Muriel flippantly styled the transcendental philosopher and his school, there was no saying how many days might elapse before he would again condescend to turn his thoughts to sublunary matters. It was, undeniably, very provoking to live in the house with so distin-

guished a man—one, too, who had rendered you a signal service—and yet be cut off from all possibility of intercourse with him. Books are all very well, but one cannot read for ever, and Muriel had heard some one say that you might learn more in a few days by association with an original and cultivated mind than could be acquired by years of study. In such speculations did the morning wear away; so swiftly, indeed, that Muriel was slightly ashamed as well as surprised when the luncheon-bell roused her from her reverie.

Her midday meal was eaten in haste and in solitude. Mrs. Erskine had sent down a message desiring her own luncheon and the Professor's to be brought to them upstairs, the morning's work having reached a stage which would not admit of more than momentary interruption, so Muriel hurried over her cutlets and omelet with a certain trepidation at finding herself alone in the bare, half-furnished *salle-à-manger*, the sole object of attention to the host and his two heavy-handed subordinates. She was glad when she could escape from the wide, sunshiny room, with its light walls and empty tables, into the open air again.

Everything was very still. The landscape

slept under the steady brilliancy of the afternoon sun; not a creature stirred in house or garden. The German family and the English and Swiss spinsters were alike away for the day, making excursions in one direction or another; the Belgian lawyer had left for Italy in the morning. Upstairs, behind the closed *persiennes*, Muriel could just distinguish her aunt's sweet monotonous tones, as she read a passage aloud from time to time. On the verandah, a sleepy cat basked in the sunniest corner, and blinked lazily at the girl as she passed. "Everything seems asleep this afternoon," Muriel said to herself, "but I am not going to follow everything's example. Four hours wasted in one day is enough in all conscience."

She returned to her morning's seat, but as reading had already proved itself so unattractive, she did not this time take a book with her. Instead, she spread out her sketching paraphernalia with much care and pomp, and applied herself vigorously to a half-finished drawing of the Frohnalp. For about twenty minutes she worked steadily. Then her pencil began to pause and waver, and at last stopped altogether. She was again busy interpreting yesterday's text by the light of this morning's commentary—so busy,

so absorbed even, that she did not hear a footstep crossing the grassy slope behind her, and started perceptibly when a voice said over her shoulder, "You are putting this heavenly afternoon to exactly its proper use."

Mr. Wentworth came into view as he spoke, raising his hat, and smiling slightly.

Muriel coloured as she returned his salutation. "I should be puzzled to know what use I am putting it to," she rejoined. "I fear I must plead guilty to having spent a considerable part of it in doing nothing."

"Absolutely nothing?" inquired Wentworth, fixing his keen glance full upon her.

"Well," answered Muriel, laughing to conceal her embarrassment under this sudden cross-examination, "I came out with the full intention of drawing, but I am afraid I have spent my time in thinking idly."

"I was right then. You were dreaming, as I supposed when I looked down upon you from the top of that bank just now; and this afternoon was specially made to dream in. You have shown your artistic sense of the fitness of things in so employing it."

"I am very much obliged to you for judging me so leniently." Muriel tried to speak lightly

and unconcernedly, feeling unaccountably confused all the while, and conscious of a momentarily increasing desire to get up and run away. However, she decided that this course would be both childish and ill-bred, and she was further aware, in spite of her fears, of a lurking wish to stay where she was. So she sat resolutely still, though the complete silence of the next few moments tried her composure sorely. Perhaps her companion, who remained perfectly cool and collected, noted the nervous pressure of her hands one over another, and took pity on her embarrassment, for he strolled leisurely nearer, and asked kindly, "Will you let me look at your work?"

"With pleasure," Muriel responded with alacrity—anything was better than sitting still under scrutiny in dead silence. "But I fear it is not worth the looking at. This sketch is only half done, and I have had very little practice in drawing from nature."

"Your middle distance is a little out of perspective," said Mr. Wentworth straightforwardly, "and there is something wrong with these trees in the foreground. Do you see what it is? They give one the impression of growing actually in the water itself, instead of on the ledge above

it. Can you put that right? Or"—as Muriel's pencil moved hesitatingly towards the spot indicated—"perhaps you will allow me to show you what I mean?"

Muriel held out her drawing-board like a child who has received its master's orders, and Wentworth seated himself on the bench at her side.

"Forgive my tutorial airs," he said, as he rapidly effaced Muriel's error, and traced in its room a fresh foreground, working with swift, easy movements, very unlike poor Muriel's painstaking and deliberate outlines. "I act so often as my little girls' drawing-master, that I fall into the part unconsciously."

His little girls! Mr. Wentworth was married, then, after all.

"Of course they are not such advanced pupils as yourself," he went on without looking up. "The youngest, indeed, is a mere beginner; but I think Estelle, the elder one, will sketch very prettily in a year or two. She takes great delight in it." His face was very pleasantly transfigured as he spoke; every severe line in it gradually relaxed and softened, while his eyes grew bright with a subdued radiance.

"How old is she?" Muriel inquired.

"My Stella?" Paul Wentworth was fairly

smiling now. "She is between twelve and thirteen; Mabel is a year younger. They are very bright children," he added, "and wonderfully intelligent for their age. But for having some rather engrossing work to complete by a fixed date, I should have brought them with me to Switzerland this time—they would have enjoyed the life here excessively. But I really dared not. Had they been here, I should have felt bound to spend most of my time in boating—in fact, very little choice would have been left me. There are no tyrants like one's children. So I was obliged to send them to their aunt in Devonshire instead. Poor little things! it is hard on them."

Mr. Wentworth spoke so much as if he were his little daughters' sole guardian and protector that Muriel began to think her uncle must have been correct in his surmise, and that her self-constituted drawing-master was really a widower. His next words confirmed the idea.

"They are so accustomed to have me for a companion in their holidays, that I am afraid they look upon me as a heartless deserter this summer. I have a little cottage in Surrey," he went on, turning towards Muriel and balancing her pencil between two of his fingers, "and I spend the greater part of my holidays there with

them, and my Sundays as well whenever I can manage to leave town. So we are rarely apart."

Not a word, not a hint breathed of the possible wife and mother! Muriel thought there was only one conclusion to be drawn from this significant silence.

"They must miss you very much when you are away," she murmured, feeling compelled to make some remark.

"Not so much as I miss them," returned Wentworth, with a half-sigh. "But for their companionship, I should be often lonely indeed."

He glanced at Muriel in order to see what effect this little speech, sincere enough in sentiment, yet not uttered without deliberate purpose, and curiously typical in its mixture of truth and art of the strange contradictory elements which went to make up the speaker's nature, produced upon her. To his surprise he found his words had conveyed an impression he certainly had not intended them to convey. The questioning look he had observed hovering on the girl's face a moment or two before gave place to one of reverent sympathy, while her eyes wandered stealthily to the fingers which held the pencil, as if seeking there a tangible evidence of his bereaved condition. He had difficulty for the

first minute in stifling his amusement at the mistake in which she had fallen, although his inward mirth was to a certain extent dashed with bitterness.

When he had recovered himself sufficiently, he rose and returned the little sketch. "Can you manage to work on from this?" he inquired.

"I will try. Oh, thank you! but think how my work will look beside yours!"

He smiled indulgently. "You must remember that I have had a good many years' intermittent practice at this kind of thing. You have plenty of time before you; you have only to work hard."

"I wish I had worked harder at school, when I had so many opportunities of improving," Muriel answered regretfully. "I always neglected landscape in those days and insisted on drawing figures, to my master's great disgust. Now I feel the ill consequences of my self-will."

"Did you draw from the life?"

"Figures? No, not at school; it was not permitted. But during the last year, since I went home, I have taken every one's portrait who would condescend to sit to me."

"Have you any examples in this?" asked Mr. Wentworth, possessing himself of Muriel's

portfolio. “ You have no objection to my looking at them, I hope ? Ah ! whom have we here ? ” as he extracted from the portfolio’s depths a vignette drawing of a handsome elderly man with well-cut features and a frank *bonhomie* of expression.

“ My father,” replied the young limner with a blush.

“ It is capitally drawn. You knew your line in art best, Miss Ferrars—there is a great deal of life and vigour in that head. And this is a brother, doubtless ? The likeness to the first portrait is very marked.”

“ Yes, my brother George. He is a scholar of St. Bride’s.”

“ Of which fact you are no doubt justly proud. I know several of the Fellows of St. Bride’s rather intimately, by the way. But what is this ? A study for a head of Perdita, or La Petite Fadette ? ” He held out a half-length in water-colours of Lucy in a blue cotton gown and a wide gipsy hat.

“ Your sister ! ”—when Muriel had murmured the requisite information. “ Are you considered alike ? ”

“ Generally. We are often mistaken for one another, though Lucy is a head shorter than I.”

“There is a certain likeness, I see,” Wentworth said, looking from the living to the pictured face and back again, “but I cannot understand mistaking one for the other. The difference is at least as strongly marked as the resemblance. And is this another brother?” He had drawn out a fresh portrait, and was scanning the features of Jack Arlingham.

“No,” answered Muriel, colouring furiously, to her own great annoyance. “We have only one brother. Jack—Mr. Arlingham—is our nearest neighbour, and we have known each other ever since we could speak. In fact, he is almost like a brother, though we are not related.”

“I see,” returned Wentworth stiffly. He put down the picture without further audible comment, but inwardly he relieved himself by ejaculating, “This girl is like the rest. I thought she was fresh, and simple, and unsophisticated, and now behold her all blushes at the mention of that excessively ordinary looking youth, who should be a thorough yokel from his expression. However, it is no business of mine.”

“I think you have a decided talent for figure-drawing,” he continued aloud, politely, “and I recommend you to cultivate it.” He replaced the drawings as he spoke, and re-tied the strings

of the portfolio. "Very interesting work you will find it, and far more exciting than landscape. It is so pleasant to be able to preserve portraits of your friends to carry about with you; in time you will get quite a gallery. I am sorry to say I must not linger longer over your pictures now; my work claims me."

He was turning away abruptly, when a glance at the girl's startled face, and the faltering sound of the thanks she interposed for his advice and assistance, arrested him for a moment.

"I am extremely glad to have been of any help to you," he answered in a mollified tone; then, relaxing still further after a second glance at her, he added, "I will only say *au revoir*; we shall meet again this evening." He raised his hat and left her.

Muriel came down to dinner at seven o'clock with those last words still ringing in her ears. All through the protracted meal she sat on thorns, alternately wondering whether she should be able to beguile the Professor into the garden after it was over, and reproaching herself for having omitted to introduce her uncle's name into the morning's conversation, since its introduction might have paved the way for an interview between him and his quondam acquaintance. Mr.

Wentworth interested her personally; but she was dazzled chiefly by his reputation, especially as a writer. Like most imaginative girls of her age, whose knowledge of books greatly exceeds their knowledge of the world, she looked upon a man of letters as belonging to a higher order of beings. To associate with such a one would indeed be a supreme honour, which she would not forego for worlds. And in addition, there is no doubt that the subtle fascination which Wentworth exercised, when he chose to do so, more or less over every one who came in his way, already held sway over Muriel's girlish imagination; the peculiar force and intensity of his nature seemed to act like a magnet on hers. Something there was so suggestive of facile power, and harmonizing so perfectly with her uncle's estimate of his remarkable intellectual gifts, about all Wentworth did—even his fashion of correcting her poor little sketch—that she felt justified in her desire to know him better. “He is so different from any one I ever knew before,” she pleaded inwardly in self-excuse, while endeavouring to entertain the Professor between the courses of the slow-moving repast.

That gentleman considered he had done a good day's work, and was disposed to spend

half an hour in agreeable relaxation. Therefore, when they rose from table, he delighted his niece by proposing a turn in the garden while he smoked his post-prandial cigar.

“Then I shall wait for you here,” said Mrs. Erskine, turning into the *salon* on the opposite side of the hall. “I am rather afraid of the night air myself. I suppose, Alec, you will be back in time to write those letters ready for the early post?”

“Certainly, certainly,” said the Professor, drawing his niece’s hand through his arm. The pair were turning away together, when Mrs. Erskine’s voice stopped them.

“Muriel! Before you go out, I wish you would run upstairs to my room and see if you can find the *Revue des Deux Mondes* for April. I believe it is either in my russet-leather trunk, or at the bottom of your uncle’s smaller wooden case.”

The Professor let go Muriel’s hand with a good-natured nod and “You will find me by the lake when you have fetched your aunt’s magazine.” Then he leisurely pursued his way, while the maiden flew upstairs to perform Mrs. Erskine’s behest.

Of course the book was not in either of the

places suggested by its owner. Muriel's search was a long one, and when at length she had unearthed the coveted review from among a heap of rugs, shawls, and old newspapers, and placed it, breathless, in Mrs. Erskine's quietly waiting hands, quite a quarter of an hour had elapsed. Her aunt looked after her for a moment as she sped with glowing cheeks down the steep incline towards the garden. "A very excitable child, I am afraid," she said to herself, as she turned back to her periodical. Then she lost herself in an article on recent translations from Sophocles, and thought no more about the matter.

In the lime-walk which ran along the edge of the lake it was already dusk, but Muriel could just distinguish her uncle standing close to the water's brink, with a taller, slighter figure beside him. The Professor and Wentworth had met, and were already engaged in earnest conversation.

Muriel was seized with a sudden and unaccountable fit of shyness just as she was on the point of joining them. After having hurried desperately to meet the Professor, her first thought was to make good her escape without his seeing her. She was turning back among the trees unperceived, as she imagined, when her

uncle's companion stepped forward, exclaiming, "Miss Ferrars at last! We have been waiting till you came to stroll to the point yonder"—indicating it with his hand—"where we shall get a good view of the moon rising over the Bristen-stock. You are coming with us, I hope?"

"Of course she is," the Professor answered for her, as the girl slipped round to his side, murmuring a half-audible assent. "My niece has a passion for moonlight, like most girls of her age." (A remark which profoundly irritated the subject thereof.) "About these papers of poor Lewes', Mr. Wentworth. You were saying—" He picked up the thread of the literary discussion which had been going forward at the moment of Muriel's appearance on the scene, and continued it as if he and Wentworth were still *tête-à-tête*.

Arrived at the "point," a small elevated promontory from which a sheer cliff ran down into the lake, the girl withdrew from her uncle's side, and, seating herself on the low stone wall which bounded the plateau, gazed down into the tranquil depths below, where a single beam of silvery light from the rising moon served to throw into stronger relief the intense blackness of the surrounding shadows. Truth to tell,

she was a little hurt at the total disregard of her presence shown by her companions. She was accustomed to such oblivion on the Professor's part; but hitherto Mr. Wentworth had been so kind and courteous! However, it was absurd of her to feel annoyed. A mere country girl could have no subjects in common with a clever man of the world, and it was natural that Mr. Wentworth should prefer her uncle's more interesting conversation.

If Muriel had been more observant and experienced, she would have seen that while Paul Wentworth talked to the Professor, his keen eyes scarcely quitted her own downcast face. Not an effect of light and shadow, not an expression of interest or a shade of disappointment which crossed it, was lost upon him. He was watching her still as she sat drooping on the wall, her very attitude unconsciously expressive of annoyance and dissatisfaction, with the suggestion of a smile on his lips.

When she looked round, after a minute or two, he had moved away to some little distance, mountain-glass in hand. Her uncle, however, was still close to her, and she seized the opportunity of this disengaged moment to proffer a petition which had been hovering on her lips

for the last half-hour. She was still warmly arguing and pleading her cause when Wentworth rejoined them.

“Tell this importunate damsel,” said the Professor to the other man, “that time and the post wait for no man—and no woman; and that her romantic fancies must give way to my business letters.”

“How comes it that the two interests clash on this occasion?” inquired Wentworth, with one of his swift glances at Muriel.

“She wants me to throw all consideration of to-morrow’s early post to the winds, and row her out to look at the Axenberg by moonlight,” replied Erskine, with a deep resonant laugh.

“And you are not tempted, as an indulgent uncle?” Wentworth spoke to Mr. Erskine, but he looked again at Mr. Erskine’s niece.

“I am an exceedingly indulgent uncle—I appeal to you for your testimony, Thekla—but one must draw the line somewhere, and I draw it at leaving necessary letters unwritten. I am very sorry for your disappointment, my dear.”

Wentworth drew out his watch and glanced at it. “It is just ten minutes past nine,” he said. “I have one letter to write myself, but it is a short one. I have plenty of time to take

Miss Ferrars out for half an hour, if you will trust her to me. Will you go?" he asked, with a sudden softening of his voice as he turned to the girl.

"Of course she will be delighted." (The Professor was answering for Muriel again.) "Very kind of you, I am sure. I hope it will not cause you any inconvenience? You are certain? Then I will to my correspondence with an easy conscience."

The care of a beautiful niece of nineteen sat very lightly upon the shoulders of Oxford's foremost metaphysician!

"I'll go on and get the boat ready," Wentworth responded with alacrity. His quick intuition had enabled him to gauge the depths of Mr. Erskine's simplicity and ignorance of the world's ways from the first moment, or perhaps he would never have made his rather audacious proposal. However, if slightly unconventional, the expedition was also perfectly harmless—Miss Ferrars being, as he had remarked the night before, almost a child in years.

"You had better bring a cloak with you," he added, addressing her more particularly; "we shall find it fresh on the water. Surely you are not nervous?"—in a lower tone, as the colour

came and went in Muriel's cheek. "You have tested my powers as an oarsman already, remember."

"Oh no; I am not nervous."

"I am very trustworthy," Wentworth called out over his shoulder as he strode away. "I have learnt to be careful myself, though I have not yet succeeded in persuading my children to learn prudence from me."

"Paterfamilias after all, then," remarked the Professor, as soon as Wentworth was out of earshot.

"Yes," returned Muriel; "but you must be careful not to say anything about his wife, Uncle Alec. From what he let fall this morning, when talking about his little girls, I fancy he is a widower."

"Ah! a tender subject, very likely. Poor fellow! poor fellow!"

The Professor did not speak again till they reached the hotel and his wife came out to meet them. Then he suggested that she might lend the shawl she was wearing to Muriel for a boating wrap.

"Are you going out so late alone, dear?" Mrs. Erskine asked doubtfully.

"Not alone, Aunt Isabel. Mr. Wentworth

offered to take me for half an hour, as Uncle Alec could not go, and Uncle Alec accepted for me; but if you have any objection——” Muriel was not wholly free from misgivings as she looked up inquiringly into her aunt’s face. But she had not sought for counsel in the right quarter.

“Very kind of Mr. Wentworth,” answered the guileless child of fifty whom she addressed, unconsciously echoing her husband’s lately uttered words. “I am only too glad you should have some responsible friend to take you, Muriel. I don’t quite like those solitary boating expeditions of yours. Run away and enjoy yourself, but don’t keep Mr. Wentworth out too long and make yourself a trouble to him.” She spoke exactly as she might have spoken to a child of seven years old sent out to play.

As long as she lives Muriel will never forget that evening, when the cloudless skies above her head might fitly have symbolized her unclouded enjoyment of the hour. She had not been seated three minutes in the stern of Wentworth’s boat before all her embarrassment and shyness left her. Her companion applied himself to putting her at her ease, and he succeeded marvellously well. He talked on general sub-

jects—books, pictures, plays, scenery; even touching lightly on politics by the way—talked as Muriel had never heard any one talk before, yet with such simplicity and absence of affectation that she was not overpowered by his brilliancy. On the contrary, she found herself replying with ease and fluency, and with an absence of constraint such as she had never experienced before, except when alone with her brother and sister.

Meanwhile the oars kept up their rhythmic music, and the keel of the boat rippled softly through the glassy waters; and the Axenberg loomed frowning and mysterious against the sky, its peaks all white and shimmering in the transfiguring moonlight, while the kindly darkness veiled its scarred sides and rugged precipices; and the moments glided by so quickly that Muriel could scarcely believe her ears when, just as she sprang ashore at the landing-place, eleven strokes rang out from the village church tower a little way off.

“I had no idea it was so late!” she exclaimed.

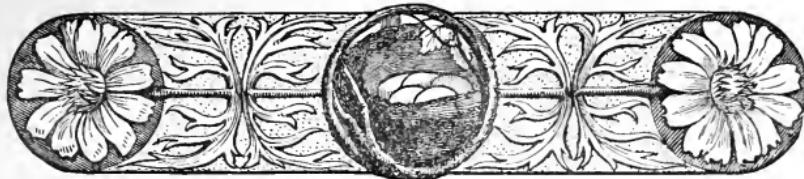
“Nor I,” said her companion softly. “I think it has been pleasant?” There was a note of interrogation in his voice.

“Oh, I have enjoyed it more than I can tell!

Thank you so very much for taking me." She gave him her hand as she spoke.

He answered, as he held it for a moment, "You must let me take you again. Good night."





CHAPTER VIII.

LE MOT DE L'ÉNIGME.

“This should have been a noble creature ; he
Hath all the energy which would have made
A goodly frame of glorious elements,
Had they been wisely mingled ; as it is,
It is an awful chaos—light and darkness—
And mind and dust—and passions and pure thoughts,
Mix'd and contending without end or order,
All dormant or destructive.”

BYRON.

THE following day was Sunday. It broke upon the Lake of the Four Forest Cantons as brightly as those which preceded it, and seemed the earnest of another week of “blue, unclouded weather.” The atmosphere was so thoroughly sun-warmed, that to an English frame, accustomed to the damps and chills which too often pervade the air during the reign of that chequered and tantalizing season which we are pleased to call summer in the British Isles, it suggested repose

rather than exertion. Under such skies, beside such waters, what need of seeking further for scenes of beauty and interest? Surely an attentive eye for what already lay within view, and a capacity for idly enjoying the beneficent rays of Phœbus Apollo, as he flung them abroad in careless profusion, piercing the shade of the thickest trees, and penetrating into every crevice and cranny of the granite cliffs, seemed all that was required of any intelligent being on that tranquil sunshiny sabbath morning at the foot of the Axenberg.

So at least Paul Wentworth thought, as he extended himself lazily on the grass in a pleasant, shady spot near the Mythen boat-house. In obedience to that force of custom which holds sway over the habits of many Englishmen who have almost ceased to regard the first day of the week from a religious point of view, he had laid aside his usual literary occupation, and was keeping holiday after his own fashion, with a new poem of Mr. Swinburne's in his hand in place of a volume of sermons. As far as he knew, he had no opportunity of attending public worship that Sunday; but I am bound to confess that, had the opportunity presented itself, it is more than doubtful whether he would have

embraced it. Like a former worthy Bishop of the Church in East Anglia, whose laxity of attendance at the cathedral services gave great occasion of scandal to his venerable verger, Wentworth must be acknowledged by any biographer with the faintest regard for historical accuracy to have been "not at all a church-going gentleman." Such rare attendances as he vouchsafed from time to time within the walls of any sacred building were generally due to a desire to gratify his children's wishes, or to avoid shocking what he called their innocent prejudices; for the rest he was too careless of the world's censure to attempt to buy its good opinion by acts of spurious piety. He cherished a profound and manly contempt for weaklings who would fain compound for the sins of the six working days of the week by punctual attendance at matins on the seventh.

Yet Wentworth was no unbeliever. He would have repelled with indignation a charge of agnosticism, and an accusation of atheism would have made him shudder. His was the eager, restless, impassioned type of intellect which will not suffer its possessor to rest content with mere negation, or to acquiesce in the complete suspension of judgment upon all subjects

outside the range of scientific demonstration which is the leading feature of the agnostic creed ; while from the darker abyss of materialism his powerful imagination alone would have sufficed to save him. No highly imaginative man ever made a thorough-going sceptic ; and Wentworth, though without distinct poetic gifts, possessed many of the peculiarities inherent in the poetic temperament. He spared not to pour out the vials of his deepest wrath and finest scorn on the devoted heads of those arrogant members of the scientific hierarchy who would banish the Creator from His own world, and correct His designs by the light of the lamp which burns in the nineteenth-century laboratory. The materializing effect which the study of physical science—a very favourite study of Wentworth's—is popularly supposed to have on many men's minds, his mind had succeeded in throwing off altogether. He yielded to no man in his frank reverence for Nature, the divine masterpiece which it was his delight to investigate ; and the flippant blasphemies of certain German scientists shocked his moral sense—a sense of which he was by no means destitute, faulty as were his methods of practical living—by their impiety no less than they revolted his refined taste by their

coarseness. The truth or falsehood of Christianity was a question which as a rule he declined to discuss ; but there was nothing supercilious in the attitude of silence he assumed towards the subject. Pressed hard on one occasion for his opinion, he had contented himself by replying that it seemed to him the world was a conundrum sadly in need of explanation, and that, on the whole, Christianity offered the best solution of the riddle. "I will accept it till you offer me a better," was his brief conclusion of the whole matter, nor could anything induce him to add a syllable more to this meagre and unwilling confession of faith. Perhaps, having a keen sense of the fitness of things, he perceived a certain incongruity in the fact of such a confession being made at all by him, whose practice was in outrageous contradiction with his half-acknowledged theory. Beyond this point it is to be feared his religious intuitions did not carry him, simply because they remained intuitions only, and never took rank as principles.

In few words, Wentworth was a man who lived by impulse ; and this fact, could it have been thoroughly apprehended by those whom his inconsistencies amused, puzzled, and irritated by turns, would have proved a very master-key

to unlock the most intricate wards in his self-contradictory nature. How should a character in which now one impulse, now another was suffered to assume the reins of government unchecked, appear consistent? Most men's minds are more or less ill regulated, it is true: Paul Wentworth's was simply not regulated at all. Qualities at first sight apparently irreconcilable flourished in bewildering confusion side by side in a temperament whose natural fervour forced each into a more than tropical luxuriance of growth; and on every varying impulse which swayed it the whole force of that strong, passionate nature was for the time being concentrated. People in general did not understand this strange, vehement many-sidedness. Men found it difficult to comprehend how a stern and determined intellectual ambition like Wentworth's could coexist with such genuine satisfaction in ephemeral social success, and were hardly brought to acknowledge the fact that a profound love of scientific research might inspire a man who had the appreciation of an Oriental for all sensuous delights of eye and ear. He was equally inconsistent where his deepest feelings were concerned. A disappointment bitter enough to mar his life as a whole did not nevertheless altogether mar

his enjoyment of the fleeting excitements in which that disappointment first induced him to take refuge.

And yet he was no weak-willed featherbrain, the mere sport of his own passions. When it pleased him to practise self-restraint, no man understood better how to rule himself; but unfortunately the virtue was one he exercised very fitfully. At heart profoundly unhappy, he was resolutely set on finding some substitute for the happiness that had escaped him, and dangerously reckless of consequences to himself and others in the process. It frequently puzzled men who knew only the better side of Wentworth's character—its fine instincts, its generous enthusiasms, the kindly feelings of which the man was still capable—to understand how others, viewing him from a different standpoint, could call him heartless and unscrupulous; but in a manner both his admirers and his detractors judged him correctly, though from opposite sides of the shield.

He was something of a social riddle, you perceive; nevertheless, the riddle was not without its key. It is indeed almost impossible to decide how a man would have shaped his course had his circumstances been all other than they

are, but certain it is at least that when Paul Wentworth laid his young passionate heart, together with his brilliant gifts and all the splendid future even then opening before him, at the feet of Alice Carew, the poor country clergyman's daughter, he stood at a turning-point in his moral history from which the simplest girl who really loved him might have urged him onward and upward to the loftiest heights of noble living. Alice Carew did not love him. She took indeed the heart he offered her, and the other things he had to bestow—these last, to do her justice, she valued profoundly—but when he clamoured for something in return, she smilingly made it plain to him that, as she euphemistically expressed it, “Nature had not intended her for an incense-burner.” And Wentworth, too proud to console himself with a mere mockery of affection, blind with misery from the unexpected blow he had received, turned despairingly from the ascent which had suddenly grown unspeakably hard and toilsome, to wander hap-hazard down the first flowery byway that invited him.

Byways are not only proverbially attractive, but proverbially numerous, and rarely far to seek. In Paul Wentworth's case the primrose

path lay very close to the gates of his own unsmiling demesne, and there was no need for him to force—barely even to demand—an entrance. If his wife's feeling towards him amounted only to tolerant indifference, there was another woman, equally young and equally beautiful, who regarded him with very dissimilar feelings from Alice's—as he well knew. Amy St. Clair, a mere girl in years married to a jealous, fiery-tempered military martinet old enough to be her father, highly imaginative, inordinately vain, and with about as much sense of right and wrong inherent in her airy nature as one would expect to find in the composition of a butterfly, had seen fit to fall desperately in love with the brilliant young lawyer whom she perceived to be burdened with a cold-hearted and unappreciative wife, and she asked nothing better than to be permitted to console him in his troubles. Wentworth let her have her way, and the sequel of the story soon became a fruitful topic of conversation in scores of London clubs and drawing-rooms. It was such a sequel as any one might have predicted, people said—given an impulsive, disappointed man of strong passions, a pretty, flighty, excitable woman who fancied herself an ill-used wife, and who was entirely

at liberty to do as she pleased, her domestic tyrant being most inopportune absent in a distant and unhealthy climate on her Majesty's business—let these two set to work to console each other, and a scandal was the natural result.

Mrs. St. Clair and her indiscretions afforded a certain amount of amusement to a great number of persons for a season or two, and shocked a few of the more sober-minded and old-fashioned folk, whose stiff, antiquated morality prevented their viewing with perfect complacency the laxity of modern manners. Only one person looked on in a wholly unconcerned manner at the progress of the unedifying little drama. Alice Wentworth remained either persistently blind or sublimely indifferent to her husband's part in the play, and if he had any idea of punishing her by enacting the *rôle* of Mrs. St. Clair's lover, he failed signally in the object he had at heart.

The smouldering scandal smouldered on for three years, and then it was all at once unexpectedly extinguished by the hand of the lady herself. Mrs. St. Clair announced one fine day that she was going to India to rejoin her husband.

Her romantic passion for Wentworth had by this time worn itself thoroughly out, and

she felt the need of a fresh excitement. Such feeling as she was capable of "gathered its fervour from novelty," and from that only; anything that was not new was dull, and she hated dulness with a mortal hatred. She had had no hesitation in seriously compromising her reputation for Wentworth's sake, to say nothing of flinging aside without scruple all regard for her wisely duty to her absent husband, but she utterly declined to complete the record of her sacrifices by adding her vanity and her love of amusement to the votive heap. Possibly, too, she was becoming uncomfortably conscious that she had occasionally outraged conventionalities a little too freely, and that certain influential members of society were beginning to show an increasing tendency to forget that they had ever enjoyed the honour of her acquaintance. Society as a rule pauses long before pronouncing its final adverse judgment on man or woman; it is rather shy of resorting to the extreme penalties of the unwritten law—"still," as Lady Jane Chamberlayne observed, when discussing 'the St. Clair affair' one day with a few intimate female friends, "there *is* a point—" and the use of this mysterious and deadly formula by such influential lips sealed Mrs. St. Clair's fate.

Perhaps some echo of the fatal phrase reached her ear—but, be this as it may, her resolution to depart remained unshaken, and three weeks after she announced it to the world, she had ordered her outfit, packed her numerous trunks, and sailed for Bombay, where she speedily found congenial employment in turning the head of General St. Clair's handsome aide-de-camp.

It might have been supposed that the perfidy of such a woman—the natural and fitting close to this ignoble and discreditable episode in his life—could have little moral effect on Wentworth. But this was hardly the case. When he gave himself up to Mrs. St. Clair's consolations, he had been in a reckless mood; she had succeeded, by means of her utter heartlessness, in stereotyping this mood into a permanent frame of mind. Wentworth had gone through a process of moral hardening; he had been thoroughly educated into cynicism. From henceforth he determined to put small confidence in men, and none at all in women, since they all appeared to be made after the same contemptible pattern. He did not swear a melodramatic vengeance on the sex—indeed, had he done so, he would have been puzzled to find time in which to execute his revenge, his busy, ambitious life leaving him

small leisure for indiscriminate love-making ; and he felt no inclination to plunge into a course of commonplace dissipation, a course which would have been equally prejudicial to his ambition and odious to his taste. But he deliberately cast behind his back all lingering remains of the nobler ideals of his youth, and proposed to himself to concentrate his energies thenceforward entirely on two objects, both purely selfish. He would rise in the world, and, as far as was compatible with this main purpose of his life, he would amuse himself in it.

After a fashion, he kept this bitterly worded resolution of his. Kept it, that is to say, just so far as a naturally warm heart and a nature not altogether warped from its finer impulses would allow him to keep it. It is true, ambition was now his acknowledged master-passion ; but his quick sympathies and a certain quixotic enthusiasm for unpopular causes disturbed the regularity of its sway over his mind and actions, and saved him from the danger of growing consistently selfish. And though, to his shame be it spoken, more than one woman had bitter reason to regret the day on which she first crossed his path, yet the pages of his history were not without their records of moral victory alternating

with those of moral disaster—and where disaster had been deliberately preferred to victory, the humiliating election had only been made after an inward struggle that assumed the proportions of a moral convulsion. The centre round which everything that was best in his nature had revolved was gone, but there were elements of good as well as evil remaining in it. All things considered, it was perhaps scarcely wonderful that the world pronounced him the most incomprehensible of men. His greatest inconsistency could scarcely draw forth an expression of surprise from any one who really knew him; the more paradoxical the action, the more characteristic it seemed of the man himself.

Perhaps it was, then, characteristic of Wentworth that, as he lay idly contented by the lake-side, enjoying the actual moment after a sybaritic fashion, he should listen with almost a touch of emotion to the tiny tinkling bells of the Alpine chapels ringing out their summons to the faithful round, and conjure up a mental picture, that brought a smile to his lips, of his fair-haired children passing through the Devonshire lanes on their way to morning service; and then that he should turn back to his Swinburne, and dream agreeably over Tristram and Iseult

(having previously noted on the flyleaf of the poem a few ideas that had occurred to him for a critical essay demolishing the lately published work on Hindu law of a professional rival he particularly disliked), and think lightly, now and again, of his moonlit row with Muriel Ferrars.

The chapel bells ceased at last. It was very hot and still—silent but for the grasshopper's chirp, and the monotonous hum of the wild bees. Early as it was, Wentworth felt almost inclined to yield to the drowsy influences of the day and place, when the sound of footsteps and voices approaching roused him from his dreamy lethargy.

Raising himself on his elbow, he could see—himself unseen, for he was completely screened from observation by the thick foliage of the tree under which he lay—a little procession proceeding from the hotel to the boat-house. Down the sloping pathway came the Professor, attired for once in full and correct clerical costume; Mrs. Erskine, pale and placid as usual; Muriel, looking very fresh and flower-like in her white dress and bonnet; and the two English ladies who were their fellow-guests, in Sunday apparel fearfully and wonderfully made, noisy with a superabundance of bugles, and brilliant with an

incalculable number of fluttering ends of prim-rose ribbon. Most of the party carried books of devotion, and their general aspect was that of persons on church-going intent. They disappeared behind the rough wooden walls of the boat-house, and then ensued a continuous murmur of voices, amongst which the Professor's deep hearty tones predominated. At length the murmur ceased, and a single voice spoke; a gruff Swiss voice, which Wentworth rightly judged to be that of a waiting boatman; and a few minutes later he saw one of the heavy gondola-like craft which ply for hire on the Lake of Lucerne, gay with striped awnings and manned by two stout oarsmen, pass by on its way to Flüelen. It had on board the party of church-goers he had been watching. Wentworth half raised himself to glance at them again as they swept by him, and then returned unconcernedly to his poet, in whose pages he remained absorbed till the noonday heat forced him to abandon his leafy retreat for the more effectual shelter of stone walls.

When he emerged again from his rooms, the afternoon shadows were already beginning to lengthen, though the full rays of the sun still burnt with so fierce a heat as to render a stroll

on the open road highly undesirable. The garden was completely deserted, and although very pretty and pleasant, its interests were of a limited order, like its extent. Wentworth soon grew weary of sauntering in so circumscribed an area, so he presently opened a wicket which he had chanced upon in the course of his pacings to and fro, and struck into the rough sloping fields outside. A few minutes' walk brought him to the Axen road, which he crossed; and being by this time in the humour for pursuing his expedition, he proceeded to ascend the face of the hill on the other side. Disdaining the rude path, he kept bravely to the springy turf, the elasticity and vigour of his movements arguing well for his strength of wind and limb. The point at which he aimed was a small clump of pines, noticeable for their position on the bare hillside, where they grew clustered under a vast boulder-like mass of granite projecting from the face of the mountain. The little nook looked very inviting, promising a pleasant combination of welcome shade and healthful breezes, so Wentworth made up his mind to establish himself and his book there in solitude for the next couple of hours.

But solitude was not to be his, for when he reached the group of trees he found its welcome

shade already occupied—by Muriel Ferrars. She sat on the bank at the foot of the tallest pine, with her hat tossed carelessly on the carpet of fir-needles at her feet, and her slender fingers clasped contemplatively round her knee. Above her the sunshine glinted through the sombre branches, touching her graceful head with its shimmering rays, and casting a network of shifting light and shadow over the skirt of her white gown. There was a book on her lap, but she was not reading it; and she looked so composed, so smiling, and so tranquilly pleased as the intruder on her maiden meditations advanced towards her, that Wentworth shrewdly suspected she must have been watching his toilsome course from the beginning to the close.

“I suppose I am trespassing on vested rights,” he began, as soon as the first greetings had been exchanged. “Don’t answer; I see I am. This place belongs to you, naturally—you look like its presiding genius. I will never set foot in it after to-day without special license, but please let me stay a little while now, if I am not greatly in your way.”

“Pray stay,” responded Muriel, rather less cool and collected than she had been two minutes before. “I have no wish to keep this place to

myself; I should be unwarrantably selfish if I did."

"But you often come here?"

"Yes, very often. I can walk the distance easily in a quarter of an hour, and it is worth the trouble of a short climb. The air is so fresh up here, and the view so glorious! I can't think how it happens that no one else should have found it out as yet."

"So much the better," replied Wentworth. "I advise you never to hint at its existence. If you are unwary enough to do so, you will find it turned by common consent into a general lounge, and Herr Müller will probably send up a set of garden-chairs and tables for its proper furnishing."

"What sacrilege!" Muriel returned laughingly. "Nevertheless, I suppose it would be considered very selfish to keep the knowledge of such a charming spot to ourselves. I mean," correcting herself hastily, "other people might enjoy it as much as I do, and——"

"Don't go back from your first impulse," said Wentworth pleadingly.

"I beg your pardon, but I don't quite understand you."

"When you said 'ourselves' just now, I hoped

it meant you were going to enlarge your special permit into a general one, and make me free of the pines for ever. Why should you retract now?"

"You mistake me," said Muriel, growing a little angry. "I should not dream of talking about permission to you at all, Mr. Wentworth. Of course you know you have a perfect right to come here whenever you choose."

"One does not always exercise one's most undoubted rights. I should certainly never exercise this one, unless I were sure that my use of it was in no way a trouble to you."

"How could it be?" the girl demanded hotly. "I am only here myself from time to time, and next week I may find some place I like better——"

"Don't be angry with me, at least," Wentworth interposed. "I am afraid you don't believe that I encroached unwittingly on your solitude. If so, I will go at once. Shall I go?"

"Please do not," Muriel entreated, with a sudden lapse from indignant majesty. "Indeed, you are entirely mistaken; I am not in the least angry, and you did not disturb me at all."

"Then you freely give me leave to stay, and

to come again?" He held to his point with calm tenacity."

"Certainly"—in rather a subdued voice.

"And we are friends again?"

"I did not know we had ever been unfriendly."

This was said very timidly indeed.

"Oh, but you must learn to speak less severely to your friends, you know," Wentworth said. Then he laughed faintly, and sat down with his book. "You see I am availing myself of your kindness at once," he remarked, "and it is a perfect light for reading, so we need not disturb one another."

As far as he himself was concerned, Wentworth demonstrated the correctness of his assertion with the most complete success for the space of half an hour. Never was there a less "disturbing" companion. The impassibility of his features was only equalled by the immobility of his figure, and by the steadiness with which he kept his eyes fixed on the page before him. Apparently he had forgotten Muriel's close proximity, so that damsels endeavoured to emulate his unconcerned air, but succeeded ill in the attempt. She could not become absorbed in her book and lose all consciousness of her companion's presence; on the contrary, she felt his presence to

be an obtrusive and annoying reality. Although he appeared to have forgotten her existence, she was secretly convinced that whenever she turned a page, or tore a blade of grass to pieces, or merely fidgeted, Wentworth was well aware of the fact; and this conviction destroyed all her peace of mind. The time grew increasingly long to her; surely hours had passed since Mr. Wentworth first came up. If so, it must be fully time to go and prepare for evening church. Muriel stole a glance at her watch, and found that though the afternoon was less advanced than she had supposed, she had at least a reasonable excuse for shortly taking her departure. She was just nerving herself for the effort, when Wentworth looked up suddenly, and said—

“Where did you and your party go this morning? I saw you pass about half-past ten.”

“We went to church.” This reply was given with a severity induced partly by a remembrance of the fact that Wentworth had not been at church also, and partly by a feeling of irritation which had gained ground during the last half-hour.

“I did not know there was an English church at Flüelen.”

“Neither is there”—in a mollified tone. Per-

haps he had only sinned through ignorance, after all. "The service was held in a room at the hotel, and the congregation was quite small; about twenty English people besides ourselves, and a few Americans. There is no regular chaplain there either, so they cannot hold a service at all unless some clergyman who is willing to officiate happens to be staying in the neighbourhood. Mr. Müller only heard this morning that one had been found for to-day, and sent up to tell us about ten o'clock."

"I wonder why he did not tell me? I am afraid he must have thought me an unpromising-looking individual for news such as that. Yet I don't see what right he had to judge me in that offhand way. I appeal to you—do you think I look hopelessly irreligious?"

"Perhaps you were out when the message came," said Muriel, ignoring his question. "He would be sure to let all his English guests know of it, I should think."

Wentworth gave her a quick look, in which a certain surprise was mingled with a new kind of admiration. Then he answered in a tone totally different from that in which he had hitherto spoken: "Well, I heard nothing of it. Perhaps I might have gone, had I known——"

He stopped abruptly, and an acute ear might have detected that he left his sentence unfinished.

Muriel took advantage of the hiatus in the conversation to put on her hat and prepare for a start.

"Are you going down already?" asked Wentworth regretfully. "What a pity! You will find it so much hotter by the lake."

"I am going to church again, and the boat is to leave at six. I would rather not have to hurry, if I can help it."

Notwithstanding, she was hurrying as she spoke. Before the words had well left her lips she had turned into the rough downward path, and was beginning to descend it at a great rate of speed. Her companion turned likewise, and walked on the grass at her side, his long strides keeping pace easily with her short, flying footsteps.

"We have plenty of time before us," he remarked, looking at his watch, after they had pursued their course a little way in silence. "There is really no need to walk so fast; you will only tire yourself out unnecessarily."

"Am I walking so very fast?" Muriel rejoined apologetically, slackening her pace. "I

was a little afraid of being late, and so I suppose I hurried unconsciously. I beg your pardon."

"Oh, I am not hurrying," Wentworth answered. There had been a gradual but perceptible change in his manner during the last few minutes, and it was now one of the simplest, friendliest kindness, just tinctured with a shade of well-suppressed amusement. "I did not speak selfishly this time; but August sun on unsheltered rock is no joke, and you don't look made of iron. You must not resent a word of warning," he added pleasantly.

The kindly intonation was still lingering in his voice when, as they reached the hotel, he asked, "At what hour did you say the boat started?"

"You are going, then?" Muriel exclaimed with frank pleasure, and a look of surprise and relief.

"Yes, I am going. There will be room for me, I suppose?"

"Oh yes! We leave at six punctually."



CHAPTER IX.

TWO SIDES TO THE SHIELD.

“ He had his gracious moment
Although you’ll not believe me.”

TENNYSON.

WHEN Wentworth presented himself at the boathouse at six o’clock, he found that the rest of the church-going party consisted only of Muriel and the ladies of many bugles and ribbon-ends. Mr. Erskine had a severe headache, and his wife would not leave him.

“ The Miss Richardsons and Mr. Wentworth are going, you say ? ” she had inquired of her niece when the latter stole into the carefully darkened sitting-room for her orders. “ Then go too by all means, dear, if you care to.” And Muriel had accepted the easily granted permission, nothing loth.

The presence of the Misses Richardson in the

boat proved an effectual bar to conversation, as far as Mr. Wentworth was concerned. Like the immortal Mr. Jinks, he retired into himself, and refused alike to the neatly turned questions of the elder lady, who believed herself to have a thirst for information, and to the bird-like sallies of the younger, who aimed at wit and *espièglerie*, any but the most frigidly courteous replies. Even these were uttered in a tone so cutting in its severity that Emmeline the sprightly was moved to remark that night, in the privacy of her apartments, to Henrietta the inquiring, "Mr. Wentworth was enough to freeze Etna itself in an active condition." And when, in answer to a last desperate appeal on the part of Miss Henrietta as to what constituted the radical difference between moss and lichen, he had replied with an alarming accession of icy politeness that "he regretted to be unable to give her any information on the subject, but it was one he had never had occasion to study," both sisters gave him up as hopeless, and turned a sulky ear to poor Muriel's well-meant efforts to be amiable and sympathetic. By the grand air of condescension with which they responded to these advances, it was evident that in their indictment against Wentworth,

Muriel herself was included. Probably they perceived that, resolute as he was not to improve his chance acquaintance with them, he was on perfectly cordial terms with his younger companion, although in their unwelcome society he refrained from addressing to her any observation beyond an occasional remark directing her attention to some special point in the surrounding scenery.

When the goal of their expedition was reached, the offended spinsters clambered hastily on shore, ignoring Wentworth's proffered assistance, and started up the narrow main street of Flüelen at a rapid rate, the very oscillation of their voluminous skirts betraying the warmth of their indignation.

Muriel, as she prepared to follow, cast a look of distress at Wentworth. He smiled back at her reassuringly.

“Did you specially wish to sit next them in church?” he demanded, almost with boyish glee. “I have been hardening myself against your appealing glances for the last twenty minutes. You are a great deal too tender-hearted; one must be resolute sometimes, in sheer self-defence.”

“It was not kind of you,” Muriel said bravely and seriously, without a suspicion of raillery in

her tone. But her heart quavered, if her voice remained steady.

Wentworth looked at her with a kind of amused astonishment.

“No,” he answered, after a moment; “I grant you that. It was not kind, perhaps. But one cannot be kind to every one, and I prefer keeping my kindnesses for those I like or admire. I cannot pretend to either liking or admiration in the present case. Philistinism and humbug—a pleasing and attractive mixture!”

“You are hard on the poor Miss Richardsons, Mr. Wentworth.”

“Can a woman who calls the Pass of Glencoe ‘quite too charming’ be anything but a Philistine; and how much genuine craving for knowledge do you suppose there was in the other sister’s desire to be instructed on the subject of mosses and rock crystals? *Non ragionam di lor.* This must be our ‘church,’ I suppose.”

The white-washed walls of the building they were in search of rose but a stone’s throw distant from the little quay of disembarkation, and two minutes later Wentworth and Muriel found themselves sitting side by side in the large bare *salon* which had been temporarily fitted up as a place of worship.

The congregation was even smaller than it had been in the morning, and numbered barely a score of souls, all told; while the room in which this scanty flock assembled could have held with ease five times that number. There was a big unshaded window at the western end, through which the sun still pelted fiercely, tracing bright streaks on the dusty floor, and throwing the twenty figures scattered about the wilderness of unoccupied rush-bottomed chairs into conspicuous relief. Years afterwards, Muriel remembered distinctly the square patch of moving light, caused by an angle of refraction in one of the window-panes, which danced untiringly up and down the sleeve of Wentworth's coat; and how a kind of dreamy wonderment as to the reason of its peculiar shape had vaguely possessed her mind and mingled with more interesting speculations touching the new friend she seemed to have suddenly acquired, on whom the officiating clergyman was bestowing so many half-puzzled but wholly interested glances of inquiry and recognition.

This clergyman was a tall, thin, elderly man, with a refined ascetic countenance, and an unaffected reverence of manner which could not fail to impress the members of his congregation.

And they were impressed: there was an atmosphere of reality pervading the worship offered in the unadorned room among the fastnesses of the Alps, which the earnest-minded priest who conducted it had often felt to be lacking in the stately services of his own beautiful and thronged London church.

The prayers were over, the hymn before the sermon was given out, and the preacher looked down from the simple desk which served him as a pulpit upon his scanty congregation. Again his glance wandered to the row of chairs on his left hand, where Wentworth had placed himself and Muriel, motioning the girl to her seat beside him with an imperious gesture which admitted of no question; again it lingered there, and withdrew disappointed.

“So familiar,” he said to his sister afterwards, as they walked back to their mountain *pension*—“so familiar that face seems to me, and yet I cannot put a name to it! It is not a face one should forget either.”

“The girl with him was very lovely, I thought.”

“Yes, quite Madonna-like. His daughter, do you think? No, hardly that. Rather too old to be his daughter, and rather too young for his

wife. Yet she was probably the one or the other, the latter more likely. A union of May and—September, let us say."

"She at least looked exceedingly happy."

"But he did not. They were a strangely contrasted couple altogether: her face such a picture of purity and content, and his so darkened and saddened in every line. Yet it has the makings of a noble countenance too. Those people interested me immensely, Mary."

They had interested him so much that in delivering his sermon he had felt himself preaching to them, and them only. It was a simple, touching little comment on the parable of the lost coin, which went home to the heart of one of those two auditors at least. Muriel sat listening with all her ears, and all her soul too.

And Wentworth? There were indeed swift subtle changes in the expression of that proud face; a sudden softening of the eyes, a transitory relaxation of the firm mouth, and, once, a quick involuntary clenching of the hand betrayed that some sudden emotion was at work inwardly—but the preacher who should flatter himself that this emotion was the result of his moving appeals imagined a vain thing. In spirit Wentworth was miles away from the place which

held him in bodily presence; the preacher's voice fell upon his ear only as an indistinct murmur, signifying nothing. He stood in an old ivy-covered chancel far away in the west of England, where a delicate-featured, white-haired man in a shabby surplice drooped in the clumsy reading-desk, and faltered out the prayers in a feeble monotone very unlike the full and varied tones of Flüelen's temporary chaplain, and beside him knelt the shadowy figure of a girl, a girl not more beautiful in reality than the flesh-and-blood maiden now at his right hand, but whose loveliness was all-illuminate with the golden glamour of a young man's first passion. Lying radiance! For fifteen years he had known it for a baleful cheat, yet the mere remembrance of its brightness dazzled his senses for a moment; he could not altogether resist the sweetness of the recollections he had evoked. Those Sunday evening wanderings in the old-fashioned garden when the last service of the day was over; the gathering round the antiquated piano after the lamp was brought in, with the little brothers and sisters clustering round, while Alice lifted her voice and sang—

“ O Paradise! O Paradise!”

It was not the phantasm he had summoned from

its grave, only the living girl at his side joining her fresh young voice to the closing hymn; and it brought Wentworth back to life again, to his life as it actually was. He turned and looked at Muriel as she sang on. So Alice had once looked and once sung—was the almost ideal sweetness which seemed to hang about this child as delusive as that with which his own fancy had adorned his early idol? The question tormented him.

The last words of blessing died away, and they came out into the calm evening air. It was still warm and balmy, but the heat of the day was over, and long purple shadows already lay upon the mountain-sides. The little congregation was dispersing quickly and noiselessly; down at the water-side the Misses Richardson, whose sense of injury had not been obliterated by the act of worship in which they had joined, were hastening into their boat. Muriel and Wentworth came out last, and walked slowly towards them. They were only twenty yards off when, with one of his sudden impulses, Wentworth stopped.

“It is quite cool now,” he said. “Why should we go back in the boat with those people? Suppose we walk instead?”

“The road looks very beautiful,” Muriel answered hesitatingly, “but I hardly know——”

“Are you too tired to walk?” He spoke in trenchant tones, and his look matched his intonation.

Muriel quailed before him. She really did not wish to go, but she was afraid to resist his will. Also she had a suspicion that if she went, she should be doing wrong; but Wentworth’s glance confused her on this point. It was a way Wentworth’s glances had—they were apt to produce a mental and moral dizziness, alike inexplicable and dangerous, in those on whom they fell. They had this effect on Muriel now, and Wentworth knew it; so he kept his eyes fixed quietly upon her while she faltered, “No, I am not in the least tired.”

“Then you would really prefer walking?” He was determined to carry off the honours as well as the fruits of victory.

“Yes, I should like it very much.”

“Just wait for a minute here, then, and I will explain matters to Miss Richardson.”

He was gone; he was back again. They had left the town and entered the path which would finally lead them into the Axen road, and several sentences had been interchanged before Muriel

recovered herself sufficiently to know what she was talking about, and to find that her companion was discussing the service they had both been attending.

“Now, tell me truly,” he was saying, “don’t you feel yourself that there is great unreality in giving people such hymns to sing? You sang ‘O Paradise!’ as if you fully meant it to-night, and I have no doubt you thought you did—at the moment. Perhaps you were a little exalted by the sermon—I don’t know whether it was of an exalting nature, for I must plead guilty to not having heard a word of it—and so had worked yourself into an exalted state of mind,—also for the moment. But think of those words now, calmly and coolly, and then tell me if you think it reasonable that you and the dozen other good people present—I say nothing about faulty individuals like myself, mind you; we have no right to expect our feelings to be considered;—but is it fitting that even you and others like you should be required to profess this profound contempt for all things earthly, and these fervid desires to become disembodied spirits on the instant? It is a fitness I fail wholly to perceive.”

Muriel was equally surprised and bewildered by this sudden outburst.

"I suppose the sentiment of some hymns is exaggerated," she said slowly; "and this may be one of the number. But I believe the idea is—I can't express myself properly, Mr. Wentworth, but perhaps you can understand what I mean—that it is our duty to aim at such feelings, and that if we were better we should actually feel in that way."

"Meanwhile," Wentworth retorted, "I see no advantage in uttering untruth. You will say I use harsh words, but think what would be your estimate of a man who in ordinary society habitually stifled his real opinions, and expressed those he fancied he ought to hold! Yet the cases are precisely analogous."

"There may always be some people present who are in harmony with what they sing. It would be impossible to suit everybody's individual frame of mind."

"Granted. But what I maintain is that some of the sentiments we were called upon to express to-night were such as no ordinary human being ever experiences. I appeal to you; I put it to you to be frank with yourself. You enunciated with great earnestness the view that you were weary of earth, and desired to be removed from this sublunary sphere as soon as possible. Now,

I don't believe that you are in the least weary of earth, and I do believe you would like to spend many years yet in this much-abused, but still pleasant world of ours. If I mistake not, you had been feeling very happy before you went to church, and you had a tolerable prospect of subsequent enjoyment. Yet you almost—mind, I only say almost—deceived yourself into thinking you shared in these outrageous notions. As two contradictory states of mind cannot co-exist, it follows that there must have been a certain amount of insincerity in your utterances."

"Perhaps there was," Muriel answered humbly. "I did not intend to be false, nevertheless."

"You!" returned Wentworth with an indescribable intonation. "Did you think I supposed you capable of such a thing? I merely hate to hear false sentiments—false in themselves—put into lips like yours."

"I have always had such a happy life," Muriel went on, bent on exculpating herself, "that I cannot yet feel as people do who have suffered very much. Why, I never had a trouble of any kind in my life!"

Wentworth gave a sort of shiver. "What a thing to say, even at your age! But do you imagine that people, when, as you say, they have

suffered, come to look upon the world as your hymn-writer would have them do?"

"There are different ways of taking trouble, of course."

"I never yet met with any one who took it in the hymn-writer's way. I have known men—and women too—who would have been heartily glad to leave this world, it is true. But why? Simply either because they had grown sick of it, or else were so faint-hearted that they preferred dying to enduring—not because they had an irresistible longing after 'Paradise.'" He spoke in a tone of mingled bitterness and mockery.

"Those were but weak mortals, after all," he resumed more lightly; "I mean those who preferred death to further struggle with their destiny. Generally speaking, they were men who succumbed to some isolated stroke of misfortune, or grew tired of everything in life before life was half over. The latter catastrophe only overtakes exceedingly dull people, who have no resources; and as to allowing one's life to be overshadowed or one's purposes turned aside by a single disappointment, only a coward would act such a craven part. Be the loss ever so great, there are compensations to be had." He spoke as if arguing with himself.

“You don’t say anything, Miss Ferrars,” he continued presently. “Girls of your age always think an absorbing sorrow a thing to be proud of; but when you are a little older you will find that it is, on the contrary, a thing to be lived down and forgotten—*forgotten*.” He uttered the last word with an emphasis almost savage in its intensity.

“I suppose he is thinking of the loss of his wife,” Muriel reflected. “So he considers that a sorrow to be lived down and forgotten! I am sorry for him; he is far harder and more worldly than I thought at first, but it is probably his trouble which has embittered him so deeply.”

Wentworth was quite unconscious of the turn his companion’s thoughts had taken. Once for all, he may be acquitted of any intention of deceiving Muriel as to his wife’s existence. Her erroneous supposition on the subject of his widowerhood had amused him for a moment, but he had concluded that her uncle, doubtless better informed, would correct the mistake into which she had fallen—and then he thought no more about the matter. It was not his habit to discuss Mrs. Paul Wentworth with any one: there was, therefore, nothing remarkable in his refraining from any mention of her name in his

intercourse with Muriel Ferrars. But he was secretly annoyed at having permitted himself to be betrayed into something like an outbreak of feeling, and this secret annoyance caused him to lapse abruptly into silence for a time. When at last he broke the silence, it was only to make a few conventional remarks in no way connected with the previous topic of conversation.

“Now he is simply making talk,” Muriel decided. “He is difficult to understand, I think,—I wish he had not made that heartless remark about compensation. I suppose he has knocked about the world, and worn his feelings out.”

“Hark!” exclaimed Wentworth, suddenly breaking in upon her reflections, “what was that?” He halted, bending forward his head to listen.

“I heard nothing,” Muriel began.

“There it is again!” he cried, interrupting her without ceremony. “Listen! Down below—on your left hand—just where the brushwood is thickest. Don’t you hear it now?”

Their road at this point led them through a little copse where the undergrowth was very dense. Turning towards the spot indicated by Wentworth, and listening intently, Muriel fancied she heard a faint shrill cry.

"I do hear an odd sort of cry," she said. "It does not sound like a bird, unless--could it be a night-jar?"

"A night-jar--no, indeed!" Wentworth's eyes were all afire with eager excitement. "There--don't you hear it again? It is a child's voice--a little child's! Good God! and that cliff runs sheer down into the lake!"

He plunged into the tangled undergrowth as he spoke, and went bounding down the slope in the direction of the faint sounds. Just before he disappeared from view altogether, he turned to shout, "Stay where you are; don't attempt to follow! I shall be back in one moment."

He was almost as good as his word. Three minutes had certainly not elapsed when he reappeared, carrying in his arms a tiny white bundle; and the bundle proved to be really a child, a little girl of about three years old, whose daintily embroidered garments were soiled with dust and rent in some places by thorns and brambles. A small fragile creature, with soft pale locks, pathetically transparent baby hands, and a forlorn little white face, lying motionless in the abandonment of complete exhaustion on Wentworth's shoulder.

"I was just in time," he panted, as he came

up pale and breathless. "She was crawling about three yards from the edge of the precipice!"

"How did she come there?" asked Muriel, barely repressing a sob.

Wentworth looked at her with answering emotion in his face. "Heaven knows! She must have strayed away, I think." Then stooping over his burden: "There, darling! you are quite safe now. I am going to take you to mother directly. Why did you run away from her, little one? Or from nurse, was it?"

"Milly lost nurse—long, long ago," lisped the child. "Oh!"—with a feeble wail—"Milly so tired! Take Milly home and let her go sleep."

Wentworth laid his fingers tenderly on the little wrist for an instant. "I can hardly feel any pulse at all," he said, addressing Muriel. "She is terribly exhausted; I think she must have been lost for a good many hours. You see she is too worn out even to cry. I believe we ought to give her something before we take her back to Flüelen—it is there we shall probably find her friends—but the great question is where to get it."

He stood still a moment in thought, and then began to walk rapidly on. "I have it! There is a herdsman's *châlet* on the hillside just beyond

this copse. I will carry her to the foot of the hill, and then you shall sit down and hold her—she is not fit to sit up—while I go and ask for some milk, which I suppose is the best thing to give her. You won't mind my leaving you alone with her for those few minutes?"

"Mind!" said Muriel. "No, indeed. Poor little thing! Oh, Mr. Wentworth, what a mercy that you heard her!"

Wentworth made no rejoinder. Had he not been listening?

When they reached the spot he had indicated, he signed to Muriel to sit down under a solitary pine which grew there. "I shall be as quick as I can, of course," he began, "but—"

"Oh, please do be quick; I am all on fire to take her home. Think of her poor mother!"

"If she at all resembles some mothers I know," drily retorted Wentworth, "you need not waste much pity on her. Now, darling"—in his most persuasive accents to the child—"let this lady hold you for a moment, while I fetch you something nice."

But Milly liked her present nurse, and would hear of no change. She hid her face on Wentworth's shoulder, and when Muriel held out her arms invitingly, vociferated, "No! no lady!"

Milly stay with you!" Wentworth tried by turns the effect of kisses, expostulations, and arguments, but all were without avail. Milly accepted the kisses graciously, but she turned a deaf ear to the expostulations, and utterly declined to be convinced by the arguments. When Wentworth at length said, "Very well, dear, if you won't go to this lady, I must put you down on the grass by yourself," and seemed about to carry his threat into execution, she wound her little fragile arms round his neck and clung to him convulsively. "No, no! stay with Milly. Milly 'ill be good."

"What is to be done?" said Wentworth, half annoyed, half touched, disengaging the tiny clutching hands from his throat and caressing them softly as he spoke. "I don't like to insist——"

"I'll run up," Muriel responded promptly. "I can go almost as quickly as you would have done." She was gone without waiting for an answer.

"Keep to the path!" Wentworth called after her. ("I don't half like this," he muttered to himself.) Then aloud, as Muriel turned to nod acquiescence to his commands: "Be careful of yourself, my child; this Alpine grass is so

treacherously slippery sometimes. Keep strictly to the path both going and returning."

"I will, I will!" Muriel answered earnestly, for there had been a ring of unmistakable solicitude in his voice as he spoke his warning, and even after she was out of earshot she could see him anxiously watching her course. She did not pause to analyze the feeling which, more than the steep hurried climb, made her heart beat quickly as she knocked at the door of the rude hut above.

The inmates were excessively dull of comprehension, a little inclined to be churlish, and very slow to understand Muriel's careful Hanoverian German, while she found equal difficulty in grasping the meaning of their uncouth patois; but at length she succeeded in obtaining what she had come for, and set off on her return journey. This she accomplished much more slowly than the ascent, being now burdened with a cup and a pitcher of milk, while the path, though not positively dangerous, necessitated careful walking. She was long enough on the road for Wentworth to feel a certain relief when she tripped up to him safe and smiling.

He was sitting under the tree where she had left him, still holding little Milly, who, worn out

with fatigue and fasting, had fallen peacefully asleep in his arms. That she might rest more comfortably, he had taken off the child's hat, and her flaxen head lay pillowed on his breast; from one tiny hand, relaxed in slumber, drooped two or three Alpine flowers which he must have picked for her amusement, and round the other she had twisted a straying lock of his dark hair. As Muriel approached the pair, Wentworth looked first up at her and then down at the sleeping child with an expression on his face such as the girl had only once before seen there —a beautiful tenderness which softened and glorified it.

"I am glad you are back again," he said in a low voice, so as not to disturb the little sleeper. "I was reproaching myself for having let you go at all. Now, if you will put those things down for a moment, you might help me to complete this piece of work before we wake her."

"It seems a pity to wake her at all."

"But it must be done, and I want to finish with her foot first. Don't you admire my skill as an amateur surgeon?" Then Muriel perceived that the child in her wanderings must have injured her foot, for Wentworth had removed one little shoe and was extemporizing a bandage with his handkerchief.

“Is she badly hurt?” the girl inquired, as she knelt down to give the required aid.

“No, a mere graze; but this is a delicate little fairy, unfit to bear much pain.” He looked down kindly at the childish face now growing flushed with sleep. “Just hold this—so—for a minute, and give me the other corner. There! that will do; we won’t try to put the shoe on again. Now you shall wake the Sleeping Beauty.”

“How am I to wake her?”

“As the Prince did, of course. Being of such tender years, she may well be satisfied with a Princess this time.”

“But she is afraid of me,” said Muriel, drawing back a little. “I shall only startle her. If you would rouse her gently yourself, I am sure it would be much better.”

“I think not. I particularly wish you to do this,” said Wentworth with sudden vehemence. “I ask you to do it—to please me.” He looked straight into Muriel’s eyes as he spoke.

Muriel stooped obediently and laid her lips on Milly’s cheek, but the child did not stir. Wentworth, watching the two with a glance of mingled triumph and admiration it was as well Muriel did not see, smiled and said lightly, with an abrupt change of mood, “You see she does

not wake for you. It never answers to alter the lines of these old legends. For the matter of that, you are asleep as yet yourself, I believe; so how should you wake another?"

He bent over the child again. "Milly!" he said softly, as he set a kiss on the waxen brow.

She woke immediately and smiled at him. "Now the cup—quick!" he commanded, practical again in a moment, "before she has time to get frightened or fretful." Muriel passed it to him, pondering his last enigmatical utterance the while.

"How your hands tremble!" he said. This time he was not speaking to Milly, yet the tone of his voice was like a spoken caress. "That hurried climb has been too much for you; I ought never to have allowed you to attempt it—and now unfortunately I have to take you back a little way, for you cannot go on by yourself, and we must restore this little maid to her friends."

"It has not been too much for me, indeed," Muriel protested.

"I think it has," he answered with equal determination. "There, she has had enough now, and we will start. Come, Milly, we are going to take you home."

The short walk back to Flüelen was accomplished almost in silence. Milly slumbered contentedly in her new protector's arms, and Muriel did not venture to intrude upon the thoughts in which he seemed lost. Only when they passed the steep wooded incline where the child's cries had first been heard, Wentworth turned to his companion for an instant. "You spoke truly," he said in a half-audible voice. "These things make one believe in a Providence."

And Muriel answered him only by her parted lips and kindling eyes. Words seemed superfluous —she was drawn strangely near to Wentworth at that moment. But when, a quarter of an hour later, he rejoined her in the hotel garden at Flüelen, where he had left her while he went to deliver the little waif into her parents' hands, he had again undergone a sudden transformation. "Well?" she had inquired eagerly at his approach. And then she saw that his face was a fine study of scorn.

"Oh, my surmise was quite correct : she belongs to a worthy couple here, whom I have just seen. The nurse has not come in yet, so they suppose she is looking for the child. I am glad somebody had the grace to do that."

"And the mother—the parents—were not they alarmed?"

“How could they be, seeing they never knew the child was lost until she was found? The lady ‘believed all the children had been out since midday, and supposed they had come in and gone to bed while she was at dinner.’ Truly an anxious parent!”

“But she must have been horrified when she heard?”

“She was so greatly obliged to me,” answered Wentworth drily; “that seemed to be her chief idea. Her politeness was intense and her thanks profuse. And her husband must come and call on me—I believe they have serious thoughts of asking me to dinner. Poor little Milly! I am sorry for her.” He dropped the subject abruptly, and during the homeward walk spoke only on indifferent topics.

When they reached their destination the moon was already up, flooding everything with an intense silvery whiteness, and Wentworth paused on the steps of the verandah to point out the deep shadows cast by the Frohnalp on the glistening surface of the lake below.

“You must let me give you some more drawing-lessons this week,” he said.

(Then he was not going away at present, at any rate.)

“Thank you very much. If the weather is fine——”

“It will be fine. This has been a halcyon Sunday, and it is the threshold of a halcyon week, I am sure.”

And it was a halcyon week to Muriel. In after-life she learnt to look upon it as the happiest in her life. She still passed many solitary hours, it is true, for the Erskines were more than ever engrossed in their work and in each other, while Wentworth necessarily gave up much time to his proof-sheets; but there were no *days* of unbroken solitude for her now, none altogether without interest and companionship. As the week grew older, Wentworth gave her more and more of his society, and the society of such a man proved to Muriel the unlocking of a new world, a world of fresh ideas. Hitherto the girl’s eager intellect had been checked in its development by the narrow bounds of her monotonous existence, and she had found few indeed, among those with whom she held daily intercourse, who could so much as comprehend her cravings after a wider and fuller life, or her passionate sympathy with such manifestations of it as reached her through the medium of books; now something of the great mechanism of the

world-machine was constantly being laid bare to her by one who had personal experience both of its inner and outer workings. She was being taught to see men and things, no longer only as they were portrayed for her by poetic, or historic, or even journalistic pens, but as they appeared viewed through the living lens of a very gifted and powerful mind that had had excellent opportunity to study them attentively. Small wonder if she found the hours spent with her new friend delightful, since each one represented a widening of her mental horizon, an addition to the sum of the things it was possible for her to know and enjoy.

Intercourse with Wentworth had, besides, the charm that only the unexpected can give. He was rarely twice alike—the subject that absorbed him in the morning was exchanged for one wholly dissimilar at night, and if specially discursive and airy in his talk one day, he would probably be inclined for graver topics the next. But, whatever his mood in other respects, he preserved an unvarying kindly regard for Muriel, and with this kindly regard she was well content—she desired nothing more. For she was not in the least in love with Wentworth (except perhaps in the moments when she thought of him

with Milly in his arms). Her admiration for him indeed knew no bounds; but admiration, though closely akin to love, may exist quite independently of it. Wentworth fascinated Muriel's intellect, dazzled her imagination, swayed her will, daily and hourly, according to his pleasure in a thousand insignificant determinations—but as yet this was all. And therefore she was still supremely happy, totally ignorant of the smouldering volcano actually heaving under her footsteps, and contented to play like a child with the flowers on the very crater's edge.

Meanwhile, the worthy Professor and his wife watched her at her dangerous sport, and smiled well-pleased—although she made no secret of the hours spent in Wentworth's companionship, the morning drawing-lessons, the afternoon rambles, the sunset excursions on the lake. Sometimes Mr. Erskine would join his niece and his friend on these last occasions, it is true. But if his books or his pipe proved more beguiling, he had no scruple in speeding them on their way without his supervision. He and his Isabel were emphatically of those who think no evil; and, besides, Muriel was a child still in their estimation. It was a great satisfaction

to know her safe in such keeping as Wentworth's, a man old enough to be her father, and with children of his own to boot.

As to Wentworth himself, if he had ever had any prevision of danger, it vanished like a smoke-wreath before the rising sun of his new fancy. The girl interested him, pleased him, satisfied his fastidious taste; her evident admiration for himself was a source of gratification to him; and, solitary as he was for the time being, an occasional hour spent in converse with that bright, unsophisticated mind and in contemplation of that mobile, spiritual face was too great an attraction to be lightly foregone. *Ecco!* The die was cast.

Besides, what danger could there be to apprehend? Muriel Ferrars was a mere child (it was curious how every one insisted on keeping up this convenient fiction): was it likely that a man of his age and mould would be taken captive, after nine days' acquaintance, by an untutored girl of nineteen? Folly! Absurdity! He thought her charmingly pretty; as a study he found her interesting; he enjoyed the responsive thrill with which her thought answered his just as a skilled player might enjoy running his fingers over the keys of some delicate new

musical instrument; he would even go so far as to say he was fond of her, as one does grow fond of an engaging child—but that was all.

After some such fashion did Wentworth argue, when he paused to argue with himself at all. But he was not given as a rule to much self-communing. And so the week went by, and melted into a second.





CHAPTER X.

UNDER THE PINES.

“She should never have look’d at me
If she meant I should not love her;
There are other . . . men you call such,
I suppose . . . she may discover
All her soul to, if she pleases,
And yet leave much as she found them ;
But I’m not so.”

R. BROWNING.

“ You need not wear such a look of indignation. I admire him too, only with more discrimination and less fervour than you. You must allow something for first enthusiasms and the natural bent of the youthful mind towards hero-worship. Don’t think me unsympathetic. I can be indifferent, enthusiastic myself, when I find any objects worthy of enthusiasm.”

“ But you find them so seldom ! ” Muriel cried. She was sitting, work in hand, among her favourite pines, looking up at Wentworth as

he lounged against a tree beside her, on the bright Monday morning which ushered in the fourth week of that month of August she had hitherto found so pleasant.

“More often than you imagine,” Wentworth returned quietly. “You judge rather hastily.”

Muriel’s mind misgave her lest her eagerness should have carried her a little too far. “I beg your pardon, Mr. Wentworth,” she said quickly; “I had no desire to judge at all, believe me. But you seem to me to live in such an atmosphere of criticism, that I have wondered sometimes whether you could ever be lifted quite out of yourself, and carried away by an enthusiasm of any kind.” She hesitated a moment. “I should like—I wish I could see you so once,” she added timidly.

“Would you really like it?” inquired Wentworth, with a dangerous gleam in his eyes. “You may have your wish some day. It has happened before now, though you may not believe it. Perhaps I am not altogether such an iceberg as I appear—you have not known me very long, remember, and you are a young observer of human nature. Meanwhile”—returning to a lighter tone—“rest assured that I fully understand your appreciation of Cavour, and even

share it to a considerable extent; only I know how to use my telescope, and it shows me some spots in the sun. I am ready to acknowledge that he was a celestial luminary—cannot you be satisfied with this admission? Or do you insist besides on my closing my eyes to those very palpable dark places on his photosphere?"

"No, no. Only I would rather not see them myself. I prefer admiring ignorantly to having my favourite ideals destroyed by learning to detect their imperfections. I know it is foolish on my part."

"Why should such knowledge destroy your ideals? Cannot you admire any one who seems to you less than perfect in his deeds?"

"Not quite in the way that I admire Count Cavour."

"How you hold to your point!" exclaimed Wentworth, half angrily, half admiringly. "Well, you are a hopeless hero-worshipper; I give you up. There is no indoctrinating you with even the smallest tincture of latter-day scepticism, and the higher criticism does not impress you one whit. I am not quite sure that I should feel gratified if I could succeed in shaking your faith in your pet heroes and fetishes, and I cannot honestly say that I ever

expected to succeed ; I saw from the first that you were a born enthusiast. In this particular, at least, my surmises concerning you have proved correct ; but in other respects I own you have surprised me."

"As how ?" inquired Muriel saucily. Constant intercourse with Wentworth, and unfailing indulgence on his part had gone far to dissipate the feelings of shyness and constraint of which she had formerly been sensible in his society.

"Well, I used to fancy you very gentle and pliable, and I am finding out by slow degrees that you can be excessively self-willed—at least, in little things. We have not yet met one another in fair fight on any great occasion ; it remains to be seen whether you could defy me quite so lightly if we were both thoroughly in earnest." He spoke jestingly, yet an under-current of feeling in his voice conveyed an idea that his words might be susceptible of a deeper meaning than the surface one.

Muriel uttered her sweet ringing laugh. "You could not have paid me a greater compliment, or one more to my taste," she said. "If my seat were not so very comfortable, and if it would not upset all the silks I have been sorting for

the last half-hour, I would get up and make you a curtsy for that speech, Mr. Wentworth. If there is one good quality I am more ambitious of acquiring than another, it is decision of character."

"You are quite strong-minded enough; you need not wish to be other than you are," he answered.

"I am not astonished that you thought me uncommonly meek at first," Muriel went on deliberately, determined to betray no undignified sign of confusion at his commendation; "for I really was in an excessively humble frame of mind for the time being. I felt so dreadfully afraid of you!"

"Afraid—of me?" said Wentworth, almost tenderly. "Was I so very harsh with you, my child?"

"You were not at all harsh, you were exceedingly kind; but I think the kinder you were, the more you frightened me. You see, I had never met a celebrity before, so your reputation awed me at once; and then my uncle was always telling me of the wonderful things you had done and written, and descanting on the still greater things he believed you capable of—— Why, at one time I was really afraid to speak to you, except in monosyllables!"

“ You foolish child ! ” (But he was hugely gratified notwithstanding.) “ And now ? ”

“ Oh, now it is quite different ! ”

“ Meaning to say that as knowledge has increased, reverence has *not* likewise ‘ grown from more to more ’ ? ”

“ That is a question I don’t think it becomes you to inquire into, Mr. Wentworth.” Muriel was inclined to be impertinent that day. Excessive happiness made her daring for the nonce.

“ Well, I am not conscious of a special desire to lay claim to reverence on any one’s part. I shall be satisfied if I can win a share of liking—and perhaps a little love—in my passage through this very unloving world.”

Silence—during which Muriel compared three slightly differing shades of olive-green embroidery silk with extraordinary care.

“ I am going to revert to our former subject and ask you a question,” said Wentworth at length, when the pause had lasted just long enough to become a little embarrassing—at least to Muriel. (Wentworth himself never felt a pause awkward. It may be doubted first of all whether he knew what awkwardness meant, and then the silence which some one else found so confusing was generally full of piquant en-

joyment to him.) "Let us put abstract enthusiasm and hero-worship on one side for a moment, please. Would you require perfection, mental and moral, in those whom you loved?" He brought the last word out softly, as if he were half afraid of the sound of it.

"Yes—no, I suppose not," Muriel answered, rather startled by this sudden cross-examination. "On second thoughts, certainly not. Of course I am quite aware that the people I care for most have faults and shortcomings, although my affection for them probably helps to hide some of their failings from me. Not that this happens always; sometimes I think it only makes one more keenly alive to anything foolish or weak in them."

"Ah! you are speaking of the affection you feel for people whom you have known all your life, and whose imperfections only show themselves to you through the softening veil of old association. I did not allude to that kind of love at all. See, I will put my question a little more plainly. Could you—I will borrow your own phrase, if you like, and say care for—could you care for any one who seemed to you very far indeed from perfect? Any new friend, for instance?"

"I cannot say, I am sure," replied Muriel, pulling a fresh skein of silk out of a bundle which lay beside her on the grass; "all my friendships are of such very ancient date. But I don't think I am apt to take fancies to fresh people unless I find something striking or winning about them, so I conclude that I should never like where I did not admire. And you know I always want to be able to admire thoroughly and without reserve."

"But all men are faulty, more or less. You are far too sensible to expect to meet even with one absolutely flawless character. Supposing you encountered your ideal paragon, what would happen when you discovered—as you inevitably would do—the first flaw in him?"

"I cannot tell." There was a little catch in her breath, and she wrestled diligently but very unskilfully with a refractory knot in the new skein. "It would depend a good deal on what you mean by a flaw."

"I do not mean if you discovered your friend to be a living falsehood; I do not mean if the whole character you had supposed a splendid reality turned out a ghastly sham," Wentworth answered, frowning. "Such a discovery cannot be forgiven; there is no palliating or pardoning

it. No; what I mean is any signal falling short of your ideal standard of goodness and greatness. Could you forgive failure like this? It would be a question between love and pride, you see—that is what it comes to. I cannot believe that you are so unbendingly proud as never to forgive yourself—and some one else—because you had made a mistake and set your hopes too high."

"One cannot very well admire and condemn at once."

"But we are not talking of admiration. We are talking of love, which is a wholly different thing. And I assure you that one may love and condemn at once, very well indeed."

Muriel shook her head. "I cannot believe that," she answered.

"Because you are merely spinning theories, and have no experience to speak from. You may admire a man's talents or respect a man's virtues, but you don't love them, believe me—you love *him*. Him, the essence of him—the intangible, incommunicable something which makes him himself and no other. Let his gifts forsake him, and his virtues too, and what difference does that make to love? The man is there still."

“Not the best part of him,” answered Muriel bravely.

“Yes, pardon me, the very best part of him—the individuality which is unchangeable while everything else varies. So long as that remains, you have no *right* to cease to love him, except under one possible condition.”

“What is that?” asked Muriel, with as much coolness as she could command.

“That he should himself change towards you.”

“There,” said Muriel, looking up for a moment, “I must disagree in my turn, Mr. Wentworth. It seems to me you would make affection a very poor and selfish thing, a thing that would only exist while it had hope of an equivalent in return. But I am sure it does not die so in practice. If the people I care for ceased to care for me, I might feel indignant—but I should not love them the less. Not even, I think, if they hated me.”

“Then I am very sorry for you,” Wentworth rejoined rather bitterly. “If such be the case, you are gifted with a most unfortunate disposition. But if you are so tenacious in your attachments, I cannot see how you are to shake yourself free of a fallen ideal so easily. You

seem to fancy that would be a matter of no difficulty at all."

"I think you are confusing things," Muriel said in a low voice.

"Confusing things? *You* are confusing them, I think! Look at that skein, and see to what admired disorder those unsteady little hands of yours have reduced it. Let me have it."

He bent down as he spoke and took the unlucky skein from her fingers. The movement was partly a manœuvre by which to gain sight of her downcast eyes, and partly an assertion of his power to command her, even in so trifling a matter. And Muriel yielded without resistance. In spite of all he had said of her obstinacy, it was not often that she ventured to resist Wentworth's imperious will.

"And now tell me," he said, when he had succeeded in bringing something like order out of the chaotic entanglement he had wrested from her passive grasp, "where I have shown mental confusion?"

Muriel had fondly hoped that Wentworth had done with that subject, but it did not so appear. He stood calmly awaiting her reply.

"You spoke of pride just now—of its being all a question of pride," she said rather incoherently;

“and I meant to say that there might be other questions involved which you left out of consideration.”

“What questions?”—very brusquely.

“Questions of right and wrong. One could not overlook them as one might mere want of faith towards one’s self.”

Her candid grey eyes looked straight up into the dark inscrutable depths of his. He knew that her words were wholly guiltless of any personal intention, but nevertheless there was that in them which stung him to the quick.

“Right and wrong are wide terms,” he said. “Every man gives a different definition of their meaning; and then we must not leave out of sight the circumstances which define them for us, whether we will or no. Till we have the individual case before us, it is so difficult to say what may be right or wrong in any particular circumstances.”

Muriel looked a little puzzled and distressed. She bent her flushed cheeks over her work without answering.

“There!” said Wentworth, changing the subject with his usual ready tact. “Enough of subtleties for to-day. We are getting quite metaphysical—a most inappropriate frame of mind in

weather like this. Let us do something to clear the mental atmosphere a little. You have not yet looked at the book I brought up to show you—a new book, which was sent me from England yesterday." He held out a dainty little volume, one of those veritable gems of the printer's and bookbinder's art with which the modern press has filled our library shelves and covered our drawing-room tables.

"If the contents are at all worthy of the exterior—" Muriel began. "Poems, I see! And by John Addington Symonds," she added doubtfully.

"Do you know him at all as a writer?"

"Only by name. I don't think I ever saw a book or a verse of his in my life. But my brother raves of him from time to time."

"I can well believe that. He has a numerous following among the Young Oxford of our day, I know. I will not say that I go along with them altogether in their unqualified admiration of their leader, for I do not by any means invariably agree with his critical judgments, and I dislike the style of his prose writings. It is intensely brilliant—and even too brilliant, to my mind—but I think myself that it would be all the better for a little toning down: a few more

shadows and half-lights would give it just the grandeur it lacks. But as a verse - writer Symonds is often charming. There are some things in that book little short of perfect in their way."

"Please show me what you think best," said Muriel, tendering the little volume to its owner. "When one reads a strange author for the first time, one ought to begin with a taste of his best, I think."

"I will read you one or two of the poems, if you like; then you need not put your work aside, and—do you know?—it strikes me that you have done next to nothing this morning. I am afraid you have a bad habit of sitting with your pencil or your needle in your hand, looking very industrious, but accomplishing very little."

"Thank you, I shall be very glad if you will read," was Muriel's reply, given with a praiseworthy show of composure and dignity. "There is nothing I enjoy more than being read to." She applied herself resolutely to the creation of a vine-leaf, and Wentworth opened his book.

He was an admirable reader. Gifted by nature with a remarkably beautiful voice, he had learnt to manage it with such exquisite art that it had become like a perfectly tuned instrument under

the hand of a dexterous musician; while his strongly emotional temperament informed it with all the power and pathos of unforced sentiment. He read several of Symonds' sonnets with such sweetness of intonation, such felicity of emphasis, and such nicety of sympathetic feeling, that any poet might well have thanked Heaven for such an interpreter. Yet, after the first line or two, Muriel's hand did not flag in its task, and by the end of the third sonnet the vine-leaf was triumphantly approaching completion.

"How do you like them?" Wentworth demanded, stopping and turning towards her.

"I like them—I am not sure; yes, I like them pretty well. But I think I might not have liked them at all had I read them to myself."

If Wentworth noticed the implied compliment to his powers as a reader, he showed no sign of gratification thereat. "What do you find wanting?" he inquired. "Is it the matter or the manner that you complain of? Not the manner, surely; for those three sonnets, as regards construction and language, might each and all rank as models."

"I suppose so; they are very pretty, undoubtedly. But that is just what I don't care

for, Mr. Wentworth; I like something more than prettiness in a poem. It is such a poor kind of beauty. Don't you think so?"

"I cannot say I do; prettiness has its charms. The Wye is not to be despised because it cannot rank with the Danube. However, since your craving to-day is for a little more fire and force, what do you say to this?"

He turned some pages, and read "A Farewell"—

"It is over and done with,
The love that we knew—
The cobwebs we spun with
Are beaded with dew.

"I loved thee; I leave thee—
To love thee was pain—
I dare not believe thee
To love thee again."

Muriel's hand still travelled over her work, but it moved fitfully, and executed some very imperfect stitches. When Wentworth reached the last stanza—

"Farewell! and forget me,
For I too am free
From the shame that beset me—
The sorrow of thee!"

it stopped altogether.

"Don't you hear the ghost of Byron in those lines?" said Wentworth, still pale with feeling.

“ You ought to admire the poet here, I am sure, for he takes precisely your view of the course to be taken by a person suffering from disappointed faith in an ideal.

‘I dare not believe thee
To love thee again.’

Do you still cling unreservedly to your former opinion, since you have seen it put before you in a concrete form ?”

“ Mr. Symonds’ poem is beautiful, but a trifle vague, I think. He does not give us all the circumstances of the story, and without them, you know, it is impossible to form a judgment as to what might have been right or wrong in that individual case.”

She gave him a mischievous glance, gleefully conscious of having turned the tables upon him successfully for once.

“ You are in a wicked mood to-day: there is no inducing you to give a serious answer to a simple question. I don’t think you in a fit frame of mind for poetry, but still I should like you to hear one more little lyrie. There is no question of vagueness here—this goes down to the root and into the heart of things.”

“ I did not say I disliked the vagueness,” murmured Muriel rebelliously; but Wentworth

had begun, without appearing to heed the interruption.

“To have written one song that shall live
On the lips of the fair and the free ;
To have given what heroes can give
In the service of Saint Liberty ;

“To have spoken for once with the power
Of a prophet beloved by the Lord ;
To have felt for one terrible hour
The might of the conquering sword——”

The lines came rolling out almost as if chanted, the reader's voice gradually rising in power and deepening in intensity until the end of the second verse was reached. Then it changed to a tone of the most thrilling tenderness.

“All these things were well : but I vow
I'd rather have stirred with my soul
Your soul for one minute, and now
Have been dying—such love is Life's whole !”

With the last words Wentworth leaned forward and looked at Muriel. Her work had fallen on her knee, her hands were strained tightly together ; she was almost as pale as he was. For a moment he continued to gaze at her ; then he almost threw the book from him and rose to his feet.

“They are magnificent lines,” he said, in an odd, constrained voice which had suddenly lost all its sweetness, “but *you* cannot fully enter

into them, child. At your age, how should you?"

"No, perhaps not," Muriel answered. She spoke rather faintly.

"Don't regret it!" Wentworth exclaimed passionately. "You will learn that lesson quite soon enough—too soon for your own peace, most likely. It is a knowledge which brings far more of pain than pleasure with it. *I* understand it all well enough, and I wish to Heaven I did not!"

He turned abruptly as he uttered his last vehement words, and went rapidly up the mountain path without a syllable of apology for his sudden desertion. Quite ten minutes elapsed before he came back to find Muriel still sitting in her former place. If she had had any promptings to rise and make good her escape during his absence, she had disregarded them, and though a little pale and serious, she had grown quite calm again, and was going on simply and composedly with her work. She did not even affect to be unconscious of Wentworth's returning footsteps, but looked up as he drew near, and gave him a smile of welcome. He did not respond to the mute greeting; and then she saw that his face had grown set and rigid as a mask of stone.

"I think you said you were anxious to find a gentian root fit for transplanting, Miss Ferrars," he said formally and stiffly, as he came up to her. "I have been fortunate enough to chance upon one. They are rarer than they used to be, thanks to the tourists."

Muriel managed to falter some acknowledgement, but Wentworth's changed aspect filled her with dismay. The transformation was so sudden, so unaccountable, and withal so complete — even his voice was altered, and was pitched a whole tone higher than usual, with a sharp ring in it quite foreign to its ordinary accents. Every trace of his late agitation had passed away, but its passage had left him strangely cold and distant.

He sat down a little way off from Muriel, took out a pocket-book, and began rapidly making notes in pencil, while the girl watched his movements nervously. She felt she could not endure a long *tête-à-tête* with him in silence. Already it seemed as if the mental atmosphere were electric with coming storm, and a word might let loose the elemental forces it held in suspension; but Muriel said to herself that figurative lightning-flashes and thunder-peals would be infinitely preferable to this oppressive and in-

sufferable stillness. So she cast about for a safe subject of conversation, and seized at random on the first that occurred to her.

“Have you had any further news lately of your little girls, Mr. Wentworth? You have not told me anything about them for several days.”

At no moment in his life could Paul Wentworth speak coldly or without interest of his children. His expression softened a little, and a faint look of pleasure stole into his face as he answered, still rather formally, “Thank you for asking—for being so kind as to take an interest in them. I am glad to say they are quite well. I heard from Estelle this morning.”

“Are they good correspondents?”

“Estelle writes capital letters. Her sister regards letter-writing as a heavy duty merely, at present; but Stella certainly has the pen of a ready writer.”

“Estelle is the favourite, I can see,” thought Muriel to herself. “What a paragon of perfection he thinks her!”

“Would you care to read one of the child’s letters?” inquired Wentworth after a pause. The armour of stiffness and formality which he had assumed was gradually slipping from him.

“Indeed I should, very much.”

Care? Was not this simple offer a mark of the deepest confidence—an admission of her into the sanctuary of his holiest feelings and dearest affections? Such an evidence of his trust in her far outweighed the recollection of his passing coldness.

“I think you will say it is a creditable effusion, coming from twelve years old,” remarked Wentworth. “Where *is* the letter? I can’t find it, of course, now that I want it; but I am a wofully untidy and unmethodical individual at the best of times. It is not in this pocket-book—nor yet in my coat-pockets”—after another fruitless search—“I must have put it into that case I left with your sketching tools under the rock.” He sprang down to the spot where, a few steps below the grass-covered bank on which they had established themselves, portfolios, pencil-cases, and sketching-block lay in a confused heap.

He found the mislaid envelope where he had expected to find it, and, strange to say—for his papers, as a rule, were apt to be in hopeless disorder—the coveted letter was inside it. It was written on a single large-sized sheet of thin “foreign” paper, though the envelope which

contained it was of the ordinary thick glazed kind used in home correspondence ; and as Wentworth drew it out of its cover, a small scrap of writing, which he had not noticed before, and which Estelle had evidently inserted as an after-thought, fluttered out and fell at his feet. He picked it up and glanced at it.

“ We had quite a nice long letter from mother yesterday. She is not at Aunt Emily’s now. She is staying with Mrs. Fraser, near Perth, in Scotland.”

Wentworth grew white as ashes. There was the truth, the fatal truth, of which he knew perfectly well that Muriel was still ignorant, lying before him in black and white, written in his own daughter’s round, childish handwriting. He had but to make three steps, to lay that scrap of paper in her hand, and without one spoken word on his side she would know all she needed to know—all that it was now high time she should learn. The decisive moment had come. His silence hitherto had been due to no more reprehensible cause than repugnance to enter on a distasteful subject ; but now, if persisted in, it would become a crime. Surely some good angel had inspired little Stella’s brain and pen when she added

that postscript to her letter ; surely the same angel had prompted its discovery now !

For it was not yet too late, as Wentworth knew. He had done and said nothing incapable of a reassuring explanation so far ; even his emotion that very day need not necessarily be attributed to any feeling connected with Muriel herself. There was still time to save her. The thought passed through his mind swift as an electric flash ; and that good angel knocked hard meanwhile at the door of his roused and troubled conscience. For a minute the battle raged fiercely in the man's soul ; for a second it was almost won ; and then he raised his eyes and looked—not at Heaven, but at Muriel.

The look was fatal, for it told him that, however unconsciously, she loved him already. Unseen, as she supposed, the girl was watching him, gazing at him with such a radiancy of silent worship and shy tenderness shining in her soft eyes as love alone could have lighted there. Wentworth needed no further evidence to convince him of a fact which Muriel herself had not yet fully realized ; but he was experienced in such matters, and knew the signs and tokens of old. Before the fresh storm of passionate feeling which such a revelation called

up, every dyke of resolution, every landmark of scruple, went down for the moment. The pleading, warning voice that had sounded in his ear so distinctly an instant earlier was over-powered and silenced in the tempest.

Pale to the lips, Wentworth thrust the tiny fragment of paper which might have averted the ruin of a life's happiness deep into its cover again. Then he went back to Muriel's side with the single thin sheet in his hand.

“This is my little girl's letter,” he said.





CHAPTER XI.

A BRIGHT PARTICULAR STAR.

“ I changed for you the very laws of life :
Made you the standard of all right, all fair . . .
Age and decline were man’s maturity ;
Face, form were nature’s type : more grace, more strength,
What had they been but just superfluous gauds,
Lawless divergence ? I have danced through day
On tiptoe at the music of a word,
Have wondered where was darkness gone as night
Burst into stars at brilliance of a smile ! ”

R. BROWNING.

RAIN, rain, nothing but rain ! For two or three days past the weather had been overcast and threatening, with squalls of wind and flying showers, and now it had broken up altogether in one of those pitiless downpours for which the land of the freeborn Helvetian is unfortunately famous. The wind had dropped at noon, and the black jagged masses of angry cloud had resolved themselves into one uniform pall of

leaden grey tinged at the horizon with faint deceptive gleams of a sickly whiteness—deceptive, for at three o'clock in the afternoon the rain was still falling persistently in a soft, warm, steady sheet, which looked as if it might go on falling for ever. It was all-pervading; it shut out every other sight and muffled every other sound. Even if the mountains had not hours ago wrapped themselves in their robes of mist, they would have been hidden by the thick veil of descending drops; and through the open windows nothing could be heard but the monotonous drip, drip from the roof of the verandah, the patter of the rain on the gravel walks, and the soft swirl of the little rivulets which ran like miniature torrents down the steep path leading from the *Hôtel Mythen* to the Axen road. It was a depressing day, and a shadow of the atmospheric influence seemed to have touched Muriel Ferrars' young face and converted the ordinary sweet content of its expression into something very like sadness. Muriel was paler than usual; her eyes were heavy and troubled with overmuch thought and self-communing, and every now and then the sensitive mouth would droop and quiver as if with some passing pain. She looked a forlorn youthful

figure, sitting quite alone in the long, low-ceiled *salon* which served as drawing-room and library in one, and staring out at the thickly falling rain with those pathetically puzzled eyes. There was more of perplexity than of actual suffering visible in them as yet, but already enough of both to show that the halcyon days were over. Since the morning when she listened to Addington Symonds' poems in the shade of the pines, and read Estelle Wentworth's letter to her father, Muriel had discovered that there were thorns as well as roses in the path on which she had entered.

One of the thorns was rankling in her heart and memory now. She had had a little quarrel with Wentworth the day before; and though he had been graciously pleased, on her evident distress at his anger, to show himself appeased and mollified before they parted, she had not seen him since, and naturally interpreted his avoidance of her to mean that he was not yet disposed to be wholly reconciled to her, but still cherished some lingering remnant of offence. Perhaps quarrel is too serious a word to use in reference to so trifling a coolness, which arose solely from the fact that Muriel had seen fit to defer a drawing-lesson proposed by Wentworth

from one morning to another. There had been something in his look or in the tone of his voice as he made the proposal which intimated a little too plainly that he was aware how great was the power he wielded over her, and her woman's pride was roused to take arms against him. She had felt it behoved her dignity to show him that she was not always at his command. And Wentworth had acquiesced in her decision at the time, without attempting to shake it either by argument or entreaty; but he met her at the hour appointed with such icy coldness of demeanour, and with such marked displeasure written on every feature, that the girl was wounded to the quick, and made to regret bitterly indeed what she now called her absurd display of childish self-conceit and ingratitude. Before five minutes were over his victory was complete. In two he had made his poor little victim feel herself no dignified princess, but a foolish, humbled, penitent child; in three more he had wrung her feelings unmercifully by a coolly hinted allusion to his speedy departure and the consequent cessation of their intercourse, and when he concluded his remarks by a severe recommendation to "attend to the shading of that foreground," and by an inquiry, put with

airy indifference, as to whether "she were not well that morning, since her hand was so unsteady," a suppressed light of triumph was already gleaming through the mask of frigid disapproval he still thought it expedient to retain a little longer. Of course she had thrown down her arms at once, and Wentworth saw her submission was so entire that he consented to relax in his severity towards her, and even slowly resumed his former kind and encouraging manner. For the moment she had felt quite reassured, but now that twenty-four hours had gone by without his again seeking her, she became desperately uneasy. Strange that he should avoid her so sedulously! Had his anger against her regained the upper hand? Did he think that he had too easily pardoned a slight to his kindness? His kindness! That was how Muriel always spoke to herself of his predilection for her society.

For, indeed, even now she had not analyzed her own feelings for him, much less had she attempted to fathom the nature of his regard for her. The consciousness that he stood so immeasurably above her in intellect and attainments, the knowledge that his life had been passed in so different a sphere from hers and that such a profound gulf divided them in age as in every-

thing else, all combined with the line of conduct he had seen fit to adopt to keep her in ignorance of the direction in which they were drifting. His manner, for all its semi-chivalrous tenderness, was often more fatherly than lover-like, and though she might dimly guess that his feeling for her went far deeper than mere friendly interest, it was as yet no more than a guess, and one which she would not have dared to formulate even to herself. In addition to all the rest, there was a memory between them—the memory of Wentworth's lost wife. (For Muriel was still ignorant of his real circumstances, he having decided to await “the natural development of events”—a preservation of the *status quo* which impartial witnesses of the drama might have pronounced a piece of very masterly inactivity on his part.) She began indeed to have her suspicions that the union had not been one of unalloyed happiness; still she judged that the dead woman must have been loved, and that love was a great barrier set against the uprising of any other, in the girl's eyes. And yet—at times— She would not allow herself to complete the sentence.

And now perhaps he was offended with her; he would never be her friend, her real friend again. Courteous he would still doubtless be—was he not

courteous to every one?—but courtesy was one thing, friendship another. She could at least tell herself boldly, without fear or shame, that hitherto Wentworth had not reckoned her among the crowd to whom he was merely polite and nothing more. Had she, by a ridiculous outbreak of unthankfulness and vanity, put an end to the beautiful companionship which had glorified her life for a fortnight? She hated herself for her folly, as she sat hour after hour listening to the falling raindrops, and vainly wishing that yesterday were hers to live over again in the light of to-day's experience.

In the futile endeavour to distract her thoughts from the one centre round which they revolved persistently and painfully, she drew Lucy's last letter from her work-basket, and glanced over it. She was almost shocked to find how languid had become her interest in the little details of home gaieties and home gossip set down for her amusement in the graphically written sheets of her lively correspondent. Three sentences only, which occurred towards the middle of the third page, stirred her flagging attention for a moment.

“I am indeed glad your adventure ended so well,” wrote Lucy, *“for it might have been an*

uncommonly awkward one for you. Your rescue sounds quite a romantic affair; I am only sorry that the hero of it was nothing more interesting than a middle-aged lawyer with two daughters! It is almost a pity that you should cherish such an inveterate dislike to widowers, as in time you might have got over the gallant Q.C.'s weight of years—always supposing him to be otherwise presentable—but I conclude those two young ladies would prove an insuperable objection in your eyes."

Muriel flushed crimson as she read. Lucy's light girlish banter, so unconsciously written, jarred on her restless half-awakened feelings like a rude touch on an acutely sensitive nerve. She decided loftily that "the child was growing terribly flippant;" but in truth Lucy had simply taken a humorous view of the plain facts which had been put before her by Muriel in a letter written soon after her first meeting with Wentworth. Muriel had, it is true, spoken of him with great respect, but this had in no wise impressed Lucy, who knew it was Muriel's habit to speak respectfully of people, and who possessed only a very rudimentary organ of veneration herself. A week earlier, Muriel might still have been able to laugh at Lucy's absurd way of

putting things; now she only frowned and blushed, and put the letter impatiently from her again, thrusting it deep down under a heap of coloured wools, and feeling profoundly thankful, meanwhile, that some instinct had restrained her from giving Wentworth's name more than a cursory mention in her later letters. It was utterly impossible for her to make Lucy, who had never seen him, or any one in the remotest degree resembling him, understand what manner of man he was. How long the afternoon seemed! Would the rain never cease? If Mr. Wentworth——

The thread of her reflections was summarily cut short by the opening of the door. Wentworth himself stood on the threshold, evidently fresh from an encounter with the inclemency of the weather. Raindrops sparkled on his long rough overcoat, his felt hat was limp from the soaking it had received, and little rivulets of water were running down from his dripping hair and making havoc of his collar.

Neither his condition nor his costume were particularly favourable to elegance of appearance; yet it struck Muriel that she had never yet seen him look so well. The worn look, the look of anxiety and fatigue which was habitual

to him, was for once quite absent from his face—he looked bright, excited, almost young. Lucy's disparaging remark about "the middle-aged lawyer" recurred to Muriel's mind, and she felt that she could afford to laugh at it now. Did any one ever inquire the exact age of Agamemnon, king of men? There is no comparison too extravagant for a girl who is fairly bewitched.

The degenerate modern representative of ancient heroic manhood paused a second or two in the doorway—paused just long enough to take in the girl's dejected attitude, to note the drooping figure, the bent head, the heavy eyes; then he made a step forward, put his hat and a white deal box he carried on a neighbouring chair, and took her proffered hand in both his own.

"I have been out in the wet for this last hour, so I am hardly fit to touch you," he said, holding her hand all the while immovable in his strong unyielding clasp. "How are you, my child?"

Not much need to wait for an answer to that question, to which—while Muriel's tongue faltered a conventional rejoinder—her face gave the true reply. She had been ailing, but she was better, she was well now! The eyes that had been so downcast were looking up into Wentworth's all bright with a tender gladness

which could not be concealed ; the pale cheeks were flushed with shy delight ; the sweet lips quivered with emotion and finally smiled outright for joy. Watching that beautiful transformation scene, Wentworth counted himself amply repaid for the self-denial of the last four and twenty hours—a self-denial in which certain scruples may have played their part as minor factors, but to which he had been chiefly impelled by a burning curiosity to see what effect apparent neglect would produce on his infatuated worshipper.

“ And you are quite alone ? ” was all this clever man of the world could find to say ; while Muriel, who was the first to regain her senses, made a determined movement to withdraw her hand.

“ Yes,” she answered, turning back to her work-basket, and creating great havoc and disorder among its contents, “ and I don’t expect them back till quite late. They have gone to Bâle again.”

“ The Professor and Mrs. Erskine, both of them ? ” As she grew embarrassed and incoherent, he grew cooler and more collected.

“ Both of them. Isn’t it unfortunate that they should have such a miserable day ? It began to

pour just half an hour after they started by the early steamer, and it has never once stopped since."

"And you have spent all that time quite by yourself!" pursued Wentworth, speaking in the tone he might have used to a solitary child he had found by the wayside in tears, and unkindly ignoring the woes of the travellers. "Then I think you ought to be glad to see me, little one."

"I am—very glad." She spoke so low that her words scarcely seemed to stir the air as she uttered them, and there was a moment's silence after they were spoken. Then she looked up again. "How wet you are!" she exclaimed. "Your coat looks as if it was thoroughly soaked; ought not you to take it off?"

"Perhaps I had better," said Wentworth, with a nervous laugh. "I am not improving the atmosphere of this room by keeping it on, to begin with." He divested himself of the cumbersome damp garment, and, passing through the open French window, hung it over a chair in the verandah. "The only fit place for it," he said in explanation, as he came in again. "It would go against my conscience to hang it up in the hall amongst other people's coats and ulsters. I should feel myself the guilty cause

of every case of catarrh or sore throat which occurred in the hotel for the next few days, if I committed so rash an act."

"I think the rash act consisted in taking a walk at all on such an afternoon."

"Oh, I am too seasoned a traveller to be afraid of a little mountain rain. Besides, gratitude should seal up your lips from uttering reproaches on that score, since I was employed on your service."

"On mine?"—with a quick sudden flush.

"In so far that I went to meet a box that was coming to you from Italy. I was afraid the steamer might not stop to deliver it, unless I took the precaution of having her signalled."

"A box from Italy—for me?"

"Don't you remember," Wentworth asked, transferring the wooden case he had brought in with him from the chair where he had placed it at first to the table, "that you once said you thought Switzerland contained every delight except flowers? It occurred to me that it would be easy to import the one thing wanting from the other side of the Alps, and so complete your Paradise for you at very little trouble." He spoke half whimsically, half sadly, while rapidly removing the silver paper and cotton wool which

concealed a bewildering heap of perishable loveliness.

“And you sent for these—for me!” Muriel repeated slowly, as if she were in a dream.

The flowers themselves looked almost dream-like in their exquisite fragile beauty. Late roses of the most delicate and unearthly tints, sprays of pure white stephanotis, gorgeous passion-flowers and graceful bell-like daturas such as we can only rear in hot-houses, sweet-scented myrtle and heliotrope, lay in symmetrical profusion on a bed of moss and maidenhair, filling the room with their delicious fragrance. Muriel hung over them breathless, to all appearance entranced with their beauty, but in reality she only gathered a general impression of many-hued loveliness—her eyes were too dim with happy tears to see more. She had supposed him to be offended, angry; she had dared to suspect him of cherishing a petty grudge against her; she had been repining, discontented, miserable, while all the time——! What was she, that such happiness should be meted out to her?

It is moments such as these which make our poor mortal life, even in its lower and more earthly sense, so worth the living. Into that flash of time there was compressed for Muriel

joy enough to counterbalance whole subsequent years of grief and regret.

“Then you like them, child ?” Wentworth said, laying his hand softly on the girl’s shoulder. Light as was the touch, it made her quiver through all her slight frame.

“Like them ?” She turned her radiant face and dewy eyes towards him in a rapture of grateful happiness. “I never saw anything half so lovely before. Oh, how good you are to me ! How can I thank you ?”

“You have thanked me. I am more than recompensed,” he answered quietly. Then he moved a little away from her, and began folding up the tissue wrappings which lay on the table with great deliberation.

“I must put them in water,” went on Muriel, who was still hanging over her treasures. “I feel almost afraid to touch them, but I can’t let them die, lovely things !”

“I will ring the bell for some flower-glasses,” Wentworth said in a carefully matter-of-fact tone. As usual, he had let his impulses run away with him, and was only beginning to tighten the curb now that the mischief was done. “Arranging them will help to while away what remains of this dreary afternoon.”

The Swiss waiter evinced great astonishment at the call thus unexpectedly made on the resources of his glass-cupboard, and evidently thought that there was no end to the vagaries of *ces Anglais*. However, Muriel's earnest entreaties and Wentworth's imperious orders combined produced at length a trayful of "the very oddest collection of vases to be seen between Corsica and the Hebrides, she should think," the girl declared. It seemed an insult to the perfect blossoms to imprison them in such marvels of grotesque ugliness, as crude in colour as they were clumsy in shape, but there was no help for it: she could only try to hide the vases themselves as far as possible under masses of fern and trailing foliage. When she was approaching the conclusion of her task, Wentworth, who had been reading the *Times* at the other end of the room, laid down his paper and came back to the table.

"You have done your work very cleverly," he remarked. "The queer vases look quite glorified now."

"Our sitting-room will be glorified presently," returned Muriel, lifting her bright face, "when I have carried all these upstairs. I mean to leave them there without a word, so when my uncle and aunt come back they will think we have

had a visit from the fairies in their absence. But what will you have for yourself, Mr. Wentworth? You must not give them all away, you know."

"I have given them away already. They are yours now, not mine. I will accept one or two with pleasure—as a gift from you."

"You never condescend to *wear* a flower, do you?"

"I don't think I have ever worn one in my life," he answered gravely, "but I will wear yours, if you will be so kind as to give it me."

"What shall it be? Will you have this white rosebud and a tiny bit of stephanotis?"

"Thank you." He stood watching her as she composed her diminutive bouquet, touching a leaf here and a frond there with light dexterous fingers. She proffered it to him at last with a hand which would, despite all her efforts to the contrary, persist in trembling a little.

Wentworth made no movement to take it. "Your gift is incomplete still," he said. "You must put it in for me, please."

She dared not refuse his request, which amounted almost to a command; she dared not even hesitate—but she felt it to be the most difficult task she had ever been set in her life to

perform. She did not look at Wentworth; she never raised her eyes above the second button of his dark tweed coat; she concentrated her whole attention on the flowers and the buttonhole into which she was inserting them; but even thus her fingers almost refused their office, and she was painfully conscious that his keen gaze would read and interpret correctly the meaning of her burning cheeks. Under these circumstances the operation took longer to carry out than it would otherwise have done, especially as, being determined to keep up what semblance of composure she could, Muriel was resolved not to leave her work half done. Pursuant on this resolution, she paused to give a parting touch to the spray of stephanotis, which was drooping a little to one side.

"It looks quite right now, I think," she observed. "Just this one touch, and then——"

Wentworth had stood perfectly mute and silent all the while (only Muriel had not seen his face!), but now he suddenly broke silence. "My thanks to you," he said in a low, breathless voice. Then he hurriedly bent his head, and kissed the little hand which was still busy with the stephanotis blossoms.



CHAPTER XII.

“IM THÖRICHTEN TRAUM.”

“Dreams are true while they last, and do we not live in dreams?”

TENNYSON.

MURIEL found Wentworth in the hall when she came down from her flower-scented room to *table d'hôte* that evening, and his unexpected presence there almost startled her. What did it mean? Could he be going to dine downstairs, a thing he had never yet done since he came to the Hôtel Mythen? She asked no question; she even checked the exclamation that rose to her lips on first catching sight of him. But he answered the look in her face as if it had taken form in words.

“Yes,” he said in an undertone, as he followed her into the *salle-à-manger*, and quietly took possession of the chair usually occupied by the absent Professor, “I have come out of my shell for this evening. It seemed hardly fair to leave

you to face this medley of German pedagogues and Dutch merchants"—eying the remainder of the company with supercilious distaste—"quite alone. So I came down to take care of you."

Now, Muriel would have been more than woman if she had not been gratified by this mark of tender solicitude, but at the same time she did feel slightly hurt at Wentworth's implied censure of her uncle and aunt for leaving her so wholly unprotected. (Truth to tell, Wentworth did think the Professor and his guileless wife highly reprehensible in their lax guardianship of their beautiful niece, although his justifiable indignation did not prevent his taking a cruel advantage of their carelessness.) She summoned courage to say—

"You are very good. Of course I am glad you came; but really these are all very nice people. My uncle likes them." She spoke sufficiently low for her words to be inaudible to every one but Wentworth himself.

"Very possibly," he returned in his imperturbable way. "I doubt not that they are one and all estimable and delightful. Still, being a foreigner and a stranger, you might feel a little lonely among them, and if I had my way—" He checked himself suddenly. "You don't want

to get rid of me that you may practise Dutch at your ease, do you ? ” he asked.

Muriel shook her head. “ Dutch is an uninteresting language,” she said. “ It was very kind of you to sacrifice yourself for me, for I know you hate *table d'hôte* dinners.”

“ I am not sacrificing myself; don’t credit me with any self-denial,” was his rejoinder. “ I am glad to be here. Only it is as well that you should give up all idea of self-improvement in modern tongues for the space of this one dinner, because I mean you to talk to me.”

He kept his word. If the spectacled German professor who sat on Muriel’s right hand, and who dropped in occasionally to smoke and talk Kant and Hegel with Mr. Erskine, or the phlegmatic young Dutch officer opposite cherished, either of them, any consuming desire to enter into conversation with the sweet-faced English girl, their ardent wishes were doomed to disappointment. Muriel had eyes, ears, thoughts only for her left-hand neighbour, and he certainly took care that she should be well entertained. Never had she heard him talk with greater spirit and originality, never had his wit seemed more brilliant or his sarcasm more pointed, never had the little flashes of

sentiment and poetry which often alternated curiously with an outburst of bitter irony or a phrase of the keenest worldly wisdom in the shifting mosaic of his picturesque speech rung so winningly true as they did that night. What wonder that the blonde Mynheer on the other side of the table, watching the play of light and shade, pathos and amusement over the girl's animated, expressive face, marvelled as to what on earth that arrogant-looking dark Englishman could be saying to her?

When the long dinner was over—and one at least of Herr Müller's guests was surprised to find it over so soon—and the little company of ten had filed into the hall, Muriel hesitated for an instant what to do next. There was no question of going out, for the steady splash of the interminable rain could still be heard falling distinctly. The men had gone off in a body to the smoking-room, and the only two ladies still remaining in the hotel, a stout German matron and her fragile-looking invalid daughter, betook themselves at once to their rooms. Muriel cast a long pitying look at the poor pale girl leaning heavily on her mother's strong arm, and when she turned back again, Wentworth saw that her eyes were wet.

“That girl’s health is improving, I am sure,” he said kindly, answering Muriel’s throb of feeling with his usual ready sympathy. “I have noticed that she seemed to be gaining ground steadily ever since I came here.”

“It was not that,” Muriel replied inconsequently. “Only—is it not beautiful to see how her mother tends her and takes care of her; and how Clärchen—she calls her Clärchen—seems to cling to her and look to her for everything? I cannot remember my own mother, you know,” she added a little sadly.

Ah, Muriel! you needed your mother, if ever, at this moment. Perhaps some thought of the kind crossed Wentworth’s mind, bringing compunction in its train, for he was strangely silent. He seemed to be debating something with himself.

After this curious pause had lasted a minute or two, Muriel put out her hand. “I must say good-night,” she began.

Wentworth awoke all at once from his fit of abstraction. “No, indeed you must not,” he rejoined. “Why, it is not more than eight o’clock now! Come into the *salon* for a little while, and sing to me. There is not a soul there.”

He pushed open the door and stood back for

her to enter. As on the occasion of the Sunday evening walk, again some inexplicable instinct warned her not to go, and again the strange magnetism of Wentworth's will, as his eyes rested upon her, seemed to overpower her determination to refuse. She moved slowly forward into the room, almost like a person who walks in his sleep and advances in obedience to an imaginary force which attracts or compels him. Just inside the door she halted again.

"I wonder how you knew that I sang at all, Mr. Wentworth?" she said. "And indeed I do sing very little. I have had so few lessons, unfortunately. What made you think I sang?"

"Many little things. Partly some remarks of your uncle's, partly one or two things you have said yourself at times, and partly your face, I believe. There is such a thing as a music-speaking face, and yours is pre-eminently of that order. I am rather observant by nature, and then it is my business to be always on the watch for evidence, so professional exigencies have helped to quicken natural powers in my case, you see."

Muriel walked on to the piano. "I haven't got any music with me, and I am so apt to forget my accompaniments," she sighed. "I never thought of being able to sing in Switzerland."

“Let me play for you. I have a tolerable ear and a pretty good memory; I dare say we can think of something that we both know by heart.”

This proposal relieved Muriel a little from her nervous terror. If she must needs sing—and she dared not refuse altogether—she preferred that Wentworth should be occupied with the piano-keys rather than that he should be at liberty to watch her with that penetrating scrutiny which nothing, she was convinced, could escape; it gave her a better chance of concealing her childish tremors. It gave her indeed a chance of evading the ordeal altogether, since now that the proposal was made, she could—should Wentworth prove to be unacquainted with all the songs comprised in her limited repertory—plead her inability to accompany herself as a reason for declining to sing at all. Her hopes rose high as he mentioned half a dozen ballads—for she left him to take the initiative in the matter—not one of which she knew. Wentworth, however, was not in the least disconcerted. He knew he should have his way in the end.

“There is one song I feel sure you sing,” he said, just touching a few notes softly with one hand, “and that is, ‘When the heart is young.’”

Muriel had reluctantly to admit that she knew it. “You will sing me that?” He glided into the accompaniment as he spoke, without waiting for a reply.

Muriel had a sweet, fresh mezzo-soprano voice, remarkable, especially in the upper notes, for greater fulness and richness than voices of that compass usually possess. Its great charm was its exceeding freshness, tempered by a mellowness rarely to be found in the tones of a very young girl. She had had but little teaching, and the ear of a trained musician like Wentworth would easily detect crudity and want of method in her style; but her intonation was happily perfect, and the poetic feeling, which was an inseparable part of her nature, could not but manifest itself in her singing. She sang the first few bars timidly, but as the music began to assert its subtle charm over her, she forgot her fears, and the sense of pleasure grew with every line. Higher and higher carolled the sweet voice, and Wentworth, looking up at her as she stood beside him, thought she seemed an embodiment of the spirit of joyous, unclouded youth.

“The golden break of day
Brings gladness in its ray,
And every month is May,
When the heart is young!”

Muriel's heart felt so young, so light, so glad with a sense of almost overwhelming happiness, that she unconsciously threw a thrilling personal meaning into those lines. With the pathetic verses which give the other side of the picture it was different. She sang them sweetly enough, but they did not touch her nearly; just at the moment she was incapable of feeling them in any deep sense. She ended with a smile on her lips.

“Acknowledge that I chose well for you to-night,” was Wentworth's first remark, as he leaned back in his chair. “You enjoyed singing that song.”

“I am very fond of it.” Now that the moment of exaltation was over, she felt a little shy again. “How beautifully you accompany, Mr. Wentworth! I scarcely knew you were playing—the accompaniment seemed part of the song. Very often it is something quite distinct from it—I don't mean when it is badly played only, for sometimes, when all is literally correct, there is still the jarred effect, the want of harmony, remaining. I cannot tell you how pleasant it was to feel that I could do what I liked, and yet you would always be with me.”

“Yes, I was with you. There is sympathy

between us, you see, so it is not difficult for me to follow your thought.” His voice quivered slightly, but he steadied it with an effort, and went on. “I think I understand you pretty well,” he said slowly. “That is the great thing in life—to understand one another. If I had understood . . . one or two people earlier, my life might have been a very different one from what it actually is, though most people do think I have got so much more out of it than other men, as the case stands. *They* don’t understand, either. Well, I was unpardonably dull in those early days, and we can’t shirk the consequences of our blunders. ‘Our deeds are fetters that we forge ourselves,’ and though I do think also that ‘it is the world that brings the iron,’ that reflection, consoling as it is in some sort, doesn’t help us to get free of our chains. We can only try to avoid forging fresh ones, and bitter experience may help us here. So my past mistakes have made me watchful. I have grown quick of comprehension and intuition, and, as you say, I am a good accompanist now. I don’t take everything for granted, or insist on seeing a reflection of my own feelings in other people’s minds.” He turned back to the piano. “You will give me another song?” he pleaded, dropping his strange

semi-serious, semi-ironical manner as suddenly as he had assumed it. "How is it that I never got you to sing to me before? Do you know what a voice you have, child? You took me into fairyland for five minutes just now."

He played a chord or two, and then continued, with that touch of the practical in which the many-sidedness of his mind often showed itself rather oddly in moments of highly strung emotion, "You must have more teaching, you know. Of course you have a great deal to learn—a music-master would probably tell you everything. But you have two gifts to begin with, which all the Garcias and Randeggars in the world couldn't give you—your voice and your nature. The rest you can learn if you will and as you will. What is it to be now?"

"Do you know Lawson's setting of Christina Rossetti's 'Hereafter'?"

"'When I am dead?' Surely." He began the dirgelike wailing melody, and Muriel sang again. Not so well this time. A song that was all of the grave, and parting, and forgetfulness did not greatly appeal to her in her present mood. Only when she came to the concluding words, she threw into them a passionate scorn, which startled Wentworth himself.

How bitter you are at the bare idea of being forgotten !” he exclaimed.

“Don’t you consider those lines ironical ?” inquired the girl, rather ashamed of her vehemence.

“I am not sure,” he answered musingly. “I have had various theories about them.” He hummed them softly to himself—

“‘ And if thou wilt, remember ;
And if thou wilt—forget !’

Yes, I suppose you are right. Still, almost every one forgets in time, you know, so it is best to accustom one’s self to the thought of being forgotten, and learn to take it calmly. After all, forgetfulness is wisest ; undying remembrance is a cruel mistake for the most part. Heresy, you say ? Ah—yes, ‘while the heart is young.’ ”

The profound sadness in Wentworth’s voice affected Muriel deeply. It was a strange idea, but she could not help feeling that his words were partly prompted by compassion for her—that he foresaw some misfortune near at hand ready to overtake her. But she would not encourage the gloomy notion, so, shaking off her momentary depression, she said, “And now, Mr. Wentworth, I have done your bidding, and

I want you to do something to please me in return. I want you, if you will, to sing to me yourself."

Muriel had been longing to proffer this request ever since she first made Wentworth's acquaintance. She had never forgotten the German ballad which floated down to her by snatches as she sat on the opposite shore of the lake more than a fortnight ago, but she could not muster courage to make her petition known when there seemed nothing to lead to the subject. Having an opportunity at last, she seized upon it.

Wentworth made no demur, but quietly resumed the seat he had just quitted. "I am rather out of practice," he observed, running his fingers lightly over the keys. "Like young ladies when they marry, I have given up my music—at least, to a great extent. I cannot give it up altogether, however; I care too much for it."

He passed from the prelude he had been extemporizing into a more rhythmic measure, which sounded like a transcription of some majestic chorus by one of the grand old sixteenth-century masters. Softer and softer grew the strain, until it sank into a mere echo of the

resounding chords with which it commenced, and then, breaking out as it were from among the last faint notes of the dying harmony, there arose Shelley’s “Music when soft voices die,” set to an air of exquisite sweetness. A glance at his listener’s face as he concluded told Wentworth that his selection, too, had been a felicitous one. Her parted lips, her moistened eyes, her cheeks flushed with pleasure, all betokened sufficiently how deeply he had succeeded in moving her.

“Oh, how beautiful!” she said, “how beautiful! I have always imagined what those words might be set to music really worthy of them; and this is worthy indeed. I never heard it before; who is the composer, Mr. Wentworth?”

“You could not well have heard it, for it exists only in manuscript. No”—as he saw the eager question in her face—“I did not write it. I have no talent for composition of any kind; ‘I am nothing, if not critical,’ as you once told me, if you remember, and the higher gift is rarely found in company with the lower—taste, shall we call it? The composer is a relative of mine, however; my half-sister. And now tell me—it being my turn to put questions—what made you suppose *I* sang?”

“I heard you in the wood the day we first—the day you found me on the other side of the lake with a broken oar. You were singing a German song, with a refrain that sounded like ‘*O, wenn es doch immer so bliebe!*’ It was so lovely. Do sing it now!” She made a pretty unstudied gesture of childlike appeal with her clasped hands.

He turned to the keys again. “No,” he said abruptly, checking himself as he was about to comply with her request; “on second thoughts, no! Not that song, to-night at least; some other time if you will, perhaps. Choose something else, please.”

“‘*Adelaïda*,’” she suggested timidly.

No, he had sung that too frequently, with all his soul in his voice, in the shabby drawing-room of the old west country parsonage: Alice Carew sitting by and “making plans for taking a house in Park Lane, no doubt,” he said to himself with a fierce bitterness. Aloud he answered, “Anything but that. I have sung ‘*Adelaïda*’ often enough in past years, but I shall never sing it again, I think. I hate the very sound of it!” Then recovering himself, he added, “It is far too high for me now; I don’t practise enough to keep my high notes in good

order. Shall I choose for you ? ” as Muriel seemed reluctant to make any further suggestion. She assented gladly.

Wentworth tried to think of something which should be in striking contrast with what he had sung already, and his choice fell upon a little Spanish love-song, a wild graceful air which he had often heard trolled out to a mandolin accompaniment in South America, where, as he told Muriel, there existed a vast unexplored wealth of traditional unwritten music. It suited his voice remarkably well, and he threw all the force and fervour he was capable of into it.

When he had ended the song he got up and walked away to the window, and remained standing there for two or three minutes, looking out into the dark verandah. Muriel, on her side, had indulged in no lengthy comments on his last performance ; one low-breathed “Thank you,” as he concluded, was all she felt capable of. Presently he turned and faced her, saying—

“ You don’t know Spanish ? ”

“ No, not at all.” She, too, had risen from her seat, and now leant against the mantel-piece, a slender willowy figure in light draperies outlined on the dark background of the heavy old-fashioned fireplace. The flickering uncertain

light of the two candles at the piano just touched her head and threw it into wavering relief, while her downcast face was veiled in shadow. Wentworth looked at her fixedly for a moment, and then rejoined, with a mixture of appeal and assertion in his tone—

“ Yet you could understand that song ? You could grasp its meaning ? ”

“ I imagined the meaning—from the music. But I was wrong in my imaginations, perhaps.”

“ No, you were quite right. The music alone tells all there is need to say. It is the old, sweet, terrible truth—‘ I love ; I love *you*. ’ Only that ; and one can say it without the help of words, you see.” He came suddenly back to the piano, and sat down. “ I would not sing you that song of Rubinstein’s you asked for just now, but I should like you to hear this one. German you do know—not with a grammar and dictionary knowledge, but thoroughly, don’t you ? ” he asked abruptly.

“ Oh yes ! You know I told you I was five years at school in Germany,” she answered, slightly hurt at his doubting her attainments.

Next minute she had forgotten everything but the song and the singer. Wentworth had chosen “ Es blinkt der Thau,” and it seemed to

Muriel that until that moment she had not known what singing meant.

“Es blinkt der Thau in den Gräsern der Nacht,
Der Mond zieht vorüber in stiller Pracht,
Die Nachtigall singt in den Büschen——”

Low and liquid, yet exquisitely distinct in every syllable, the lines stole out. Muriel no longer saw the dusky twilight of the dimly lighted room or heard the patter of the rain and the sighing of the wind, which was gradually rising and beginning to sweep round the house in fitful gusts—in its place she seemed to see the long stretch of velvet greensward heavy with dew lying white in the moonbeams before her, and hard by was the dark copse musical with the nightingale’s serenade. But the singer’s voice quivered with a deeper feeling—

“Wir beide wandeln dazwischen.”

Those words were scarcely more than a melodious whisper, and two great tears gathered heavily on Muriel’s long lashes as Wentworth paused, and then dropped silently down at the impetuous cry of mingled joy and pathos—

“O Lenz, wie bist Du so wunderschön!”

Did not her heart echo the cry? Was not her springtime indeed beautiful, fairer than any-

thing she had ever dreamt of or conceived ? As the music rose to its passionate climax—

“ Mit dem ersten Kuss in dem Himmelsraum,”

she felt that she was lifted far above the common everyday world into an enchanted region of delight and blessedness. But the dream was nearly at an end. With a ring of despairing sorrow in them came the two last lines :

“ Und fest zu glauben im thörichten Traum
Dass es ewig, ewig so bleibe ! ”

The song was over, and Muriel did not speak or stir. She still stood in her old place by the chimney-piece, holding her hands tightly clasped the better to conceal their uncontrollable trembling ; but to save her life she could not have uttered a word. Speech, movement, volition even, seemed gone from her.

He rose, he came towards her, he caught the little trembling hands in his ; his eyes looked down into hers with a passion of love and pity and remorse all struggling for utterance in the dark troubled depths which were no longer silent and inscrutable. So, thrilled through and through by his touch and his gaze, he held her passive for an instant ; then, in a low broken voice, he said—

"*Im thörichen Traum!*" You hear? A foolish dream? Oh, it is foolish enough, and mad enough, Heaven knows—only it is so beautiful! It has been a dream of Paradise to me this evening, and I will not remember the waking that must come. For you——" His face darkened suddenly, and he loosed his grasp of her hands a little. "No," he said half to himself, "for to-night we will imagine it *can* last—last for ever, and so—we will not say one word more. Good night, my child, good night!"

Then he dropped the hands he held, and, without another glance or touch, turned and went out into the darkness.





CHAPTER XIII.

“LOVE IS FAIR FOR A DAY.”

“Ah, my lord . . .

How did I live the life that loved you not?
What were those days wherein I walked apart
And went my way and did my will alone
And thought and wrought without you in the world?”

SWINBURNE.

NEXT morning, when Wentworth made his appearance in the garden, it seemed to Muriel that a great change had passed over him. It was not merely that he looked unusually pale and worn, or that there were dark semicircles under his eyes which spoke eloquently of a sleepless night—the change was not only or even chiefly a physical change. It extended itself to manner, bearing, voice, words—to everything he did and said, in fact. He was unusually reserved and formal in speech, strangely nervous and restless in manner, while his face wore an ex-

pression curiously compounded of trouble and determination. Muriel looked, and wondered, and grew secretly uneasy.

It was a clear sunshiny morning, and she had been pacing up and down in front of the verandah with her uncle while he smoked his after-breakfast cigar. Overhead was a dazzlingly blue sky, but yesterday's clouds were still present on the horizon, piled up in fleecy banks which might easily become dark and threatening in a few hours' time—Professor Erskine had therefore thought it only prudent to snatch a little of the morning air before settling down to his day's work. He was in an unusually genial and sociable mood, and fell readily into talk with Wentworth.

The girl stood listening silently to the conversation of the two men, the vague alarm that the first sight of Wentworth had stirred in her quickening with every moment into more painful life. It was plain to her that Mr. Wentworth was anxious to avoid addressing her directly, and that he had deliberately refrained from allowing his eyes to rest on her face even when shaking hands with her on their first meeting—a ceremony which he had performed, by the way, in a peculiarly lifeless and perfunctory fashion.

There was no use in her attempting to deceive herself. He was not overlooking her by accident, he was ignoring her presence intentionally. That was a bitter moment for the girl, who only a few hours before had realized that she loved Paul Wentworth as she had never dreamt of loving any human being.

And not only had she confessed to herself that she loved him, but she had ventured to add in her heart, awestruck and trembling at the very greatness of the gift that was hers, "And he loves me." She had felt sure, very sure, of her great blessedness then—in the quiet watches of the night, recalling the memory of his look and touch, repeating to herself his passionate, broken words—yes, presumptuous as the thought was in itself, she had felt very sure indeed. Now it seemed to her as if the whole scene of the previous evening must have been a mad, daring dream. It was in itself so unlikely a thing that he should love her; twenty-four hours earlier she would have said, an almost impossible thing. Had she mistaken him altogether; magnified an outburst of excited feeling—due perhaps to the rousing of some hidden chord of painful emotion connected with the past—into a passionate declaration of love for herself? She grew hot

with shame at the idea, and was turning to make good her escape, when a remark of Wentworth's arrested her.

"Yes, it is a delightful day," he said. "A perfect day for travelling; no rain, no dust, no wind, and plenty of sunshine. I am profoundly grateful to the clerk of the weather, for I am off to Grindelwald in an hour's time."

"To Grindelwald!" The words escaped Muriel's lips unawares. She could only hope devoutly that they had not been overheard.

"I have been working rather too continuously at my holiday task lately," Wentworth went on, still resolutely addressing himself to the Professor, "and I want two or three days of stiff walking to help me shake off the ill effects. So I shall indulge myself in a few mountaineering expeditions of the milder sort, making Grindelwald my head-quarters. You had better come with me; I dare say Mrs. Erskine would be induced to consent if she knew you had friendly aid at hand in case of any mishap."

The Professor laughed boyishly, shaking his head meanwhile. "No, thank you!" he said. "I have become far too stiff and heavy for anything more formidable than the Rigi, and I ache at the recollection of that. Besides, I don't be-

lieve in the need of so much bodily exertion to relieve the brain, at least for us of the older generation, who are pretty tough subjects as a rule—you younger men are of a more delicate and sensitive fibre, apparently. However, I dare say you are quite right, and I hope we shall see you looking better for the change on your return. Is not that the postman, Thekla?"

It was the postman, and as soon as Mr. Erskine had received a voluminous bundle of correspondence, he betook himself and his packets upstairs. After an instant's hesitation, Wentworth followed his example; Muriel alone went out again, with a letter from Lucy, the solitary missive that had fallen to her share, unopened in her hand.

Wentworth, from his window, saw her go slowly down the green slope in front of the hotel, and realized that if he wished to avoid a leave-taking, he had full opportunity of doing so. But it appeared to him that this would be rather too marked a step on his part—too markedly unfriendly, almost ungentlemanlike. He could not in common courtesy go away even for a few days without some kind of farewell to Muriel.

It was some little time before he discovered her whereabouts, after starting in search of her.

At length he found her by the lake, looking down fixedly into the water, which was less clear than usual after the recent rains. She still held her letter in her hand, and a rapid glance told him that it had remained unopened.

At the sound of his footstep the deep lovely colour rose in her cheeks—which had been very pale—and mounted to her brow for a moment; then it died away, leaving her whiter than before.

"I was looking for you to say good-bye," Wentworth began in what he intended for a light and unconcerned tone. "I am now on my way to the boat."

"You have a lovely day for your journey. I hope you will enjoy it." Muriel spoke very slowly and deliberately.

"Thanks; I have no doubt I shall, if this weather continues to favour me. I start in light marching order, you see"—holding up a knapsack he carried. "I was determined not to encumber myself with any heavy baggage. Travelling with luggage is enough to ruffle the most phlegmatic temper, and spoils a man's enjoyment of the grandest scenery on earth."

This last speech was a master stroke. It neither promised return, nor threatened final

departure. Yet there was something in Wentworth's utterance of it which did not ring quite true to Muriel's sensitively acute ear, and roused her dormant suspicions. What if he were not coming back, after all? The Professor had indeed taken it for granted; but then the Professor took so many things for granted! It would be best to know the truth.

"Is this—really good-bye?" she asked, lifting her eyes to Wentworth's face. "Are you going away altogether?"

There was a pause, just long enough to be unmistakable, before his reply came. Then he answered with decision, "No. I shall be here again in three days' time, or in four at the latest."

For the first time that morning he let his eyes meet hers fully, and she knew that he had spoken absolute truth. Whatever his previous intentions might have been, he no longer intended to carry them out. Muriel drew a long breath and remained mute; there seemed to be nothing more to say. Wentworth broke the silence hastily.

"I will see if I can get you those two colours you wanted for your sketch of Tellsplatte while I am away," he said. "Perhaps they are to be

had at Lucerne. If so, I will send them by this afternoon's steamer."

"Thank you. You are very kind; but please don't go out of your way for them, or take any trouble——"

"It will not be a trouble," Wentworth interrupted brusquely. "I am not very sanguine about getting them, but I will do my best. Good-bye."

"Good-bye," Muriel echoed him, putting her hand in his. He held it for a moment, regarding her meanwhile with a fixed gaze in which tenderness struggled for the mastery with compassion. Muriel saw only the tenderness, and her heart gave a great bound of delight.

"I wish," Wentworth said suddenly, laying his other hand gently on her arm, "that you would promise me one thing before I go. No, don't speak yet. It is a promise which you may dislike carrying into effect, so I must not let you pledge yourself until you have heard what it is."

Muriel changed colour as he spoke; her lips parted, but no sound came from them. Wentworth paused a second, and then went on with a hesitation and diffidence quite foreign to his usual manner: "Will you promise me not to go

out alone on the lake while I am away? I cannot think it safe for you, and I should feel happier about you if you had given me your promise. Will you give it me; or have I asked too much of you?"

"I promise, willingly."

"How good you are! And . . . I have not offended you in asking?"

"Offended me?" There was a strange brightness in Muriel's eyes. "I think it is very kind of you—to care——"

"You know I always thought it dangerous for you to go alone," he rejoined gravely, releasing her hand. "Now I shall be content that all is well. Good-bye."

Muriel stood quite still where he left her, following the tall erect figure with her eyes till it was lost in the windings of the path among the trees. Then she clasped her hands together with a gesture of irrepressible joy, and laughed out softly for sheer happiness.

"He asked me—asked me so earnestly to promise him *that!*!" she said to herself. "Such a little thing—such a poor petty sacrifice of my own wilful fancy was all he wanted me to make for him; yet how he thanked me for my promise! As if there were anything in the whole

world that I would not gladly promise him, anything that I would not joyfully endure or give up for his sake, if he were to ask it of me!"

Strange as it may seem, it is certain that Muriel was not at all unhappy during the four days of Wentworth's absence. It may be doubted whether she was not really happier than she had ever yet been in his actual presence. Her darling secret was so new to her still that she wanted a little time to herself in which she might rejoice in it quietly, and accustom herself to an idea which at first sight seemed almost overpowering. She could not well do this when every hour of the day was bringing with it fresh agitation and excitement, endless new revelations of Wentworth's feelings and her own. So she was positively grateful for a short breathing-space in which to look round about her and measure the length and breadth and height of that new kingdom upon which she had entered so suddenly as queen, and she moved through those four solitary days in a quiet dream of blissful satisfaction. She had ceased to puzzle over the enigma of Wentworth's strange conduct on the morning of his departure, ascribing it to the resuscitated shadows of some old grief or

disappointment which she proudly fancied—in her newly assumed royalty, poor child!—she should soon be able to make him forget. For the rest, she suspected nothing, feared nothing, and doubted him not a whit. He loved her and was coming back to her, and with this knowledge she rested content.

The steamer from Lucerne did not bring Muriel the half-promised packet from Wentworth, but two days after he left, a little parcel bearing the Grindelwald postmark reached her by the morning's delivery of letters. It contained the two colours for lack of which a sketch of hers had been left unfinished a week earlier, and this note:—

“ Hôtel d'Angleterre, Grindelwald,
“ Saturday.

“ DEAR MISS FERRARS,

“ I hunted for the enclosed all over Lucerne, but the right thing was not to be found anywhere in the town. Here I fortunately unearthed it on the first evening of my arrival, and hasten to send it to you.

“ I cannot say that I have greatly enjoyed my expedition so far: in fact, I am inclined to repent having been induced to make it. The weather, however, is delicious; so delicious that I fear you

may regret your self-denying promise. But I know you will keep it.

"Always faithfully yours,

"PAUL WENTWORTH."

There was not much in the note, and in form and language alike it was perfectly unexceptionable. Nevertheless, it might perhaps have been as well had it remained altogether unwritten.





CHAPTER XIV.

THE BREAKING OF A TEMPEST.

“A nature quiveringly poised
In reach of storms.”

GEORGE ELIOT.

IT was about four o'clock on Wednesday afternoon when Wentworth reached the Hôtel Mythen on his return. The morning had been fresh and bright, but towards midday the wind had dropped and the sky had clouded over till it became dark and lowering. The air felt heavy and sultry, and there was an unnatural stillness brooding in the atmosphere, highly ominous of coming storm.

But Wentworth took small heed of the weather. He had a definite purpose to fulfil, and the whole force of his mind and will were bent on fulfilling it, leaving him scant leisure to take note of merely external things. He only stayed a few moments to deposit his light *im-*

pedimenta in his rooms before sallying out in quest of her to whom his errand lay. It was best to get the thing over as quickly as might be.

On his way downstairs he encountered an elderly woman-servant who stood respectfully aside to make room for him. He acknowledged her civility with a careless nod and was passing on, when, to his surprise, she addressed him in English, speaking with an accent which showed that she must have been born pretty far north of the Tweed.

“ You’ll be Mr. Wentworth, I’m thinking, sir ? ” she inquired. Wentworth assented graciously. As she spoke, he had recognized her for Mrs. Erskine’s maid, a grey-haired Scotchwoman who had been nurse to the young Erskines in days gone by.

“ Maybe you’ll be after seeing our young leddy—that’s Miss Ferrars—presently, sir ? ” she went on. Man of the world as Wentworth was, he could not forbear a start at the question.

“ Yes, I shall probably see her,” he replied, with what indifference he could muster. “ Do you want to send her a message, Mrs. —— ? ”

“ McDougall, sir—Janet McDougall, if you please. Oh, and I’m feared but there’s a storm coming up, and the master and mistress away,

and she out alone, I know not where. I've sought her in the garden, but can't find her. If you would find her and bid her withindoors before the storm breaks, sir! I pray the Lord she be not out on the loch in her boat!" The woman's rugged features quivered with unwonted emotion.

"She is not in the least likely to be out on the lake," Wentworth answered with a peculiar smile. "Don't distress yourself, Mrs. McDougall; I will find your young lady and bring her back safely." And he started on his quest with renewed vigour.

Muriel was not in the garden, as her aunt's maid had said. Neither was she among her favourite pines. But that she had been there lately, however, Wentworth was well assured, for at the foot of one of the trees lay a glove she had dropped, and a small leather case which she was accustomed to carry inside her larger portfolio, and which had evidently fallen out of it when she rose to leave the spot where she had been sitting. Wentworth picked up the little glove first, and put it away with a kind of reverential tenderness in his breast-pocket; then he set to work to tie the strings of the case, which were hanging unfastened. As he did so,

one of the fitful gusts of wind which every now and then stirred the oppressive stillness caught the flapping sides and blew them apart. A single drawing fell out and fluttered to a little distance ; and as Wentworth proceeded to restore it to its place again, he glanced at it mechanically, and saw . . . his own face ! It was a lifelike sketch of himself, standing by the roadside with Milly in his arms ; and though as a work of art this portrait drawn from memory was necessarily full of technical faults, yet the expression on the face of the principal subject had been reproduced with marvellous fidelity. Underneath the picture there was pencilled in a girlish hand—

“ ‘Manners makyth man.’
‘For manners are not idle, but the fruit
Of noble nature and of loyal mind.’

“ *On the Axenstrasse,*
“ *August, 18—.*”

Men in this latter half of the nineteenth century do not in actual life—whatever they may be represented as doing on the contemporary stage—cry aloud in a sudden agony of remorse or smite their foreheads in uncontrollable mental anguish, and Wentworth was no exception to the modern rule of self-restraint. He stood quite silent and motionless with Muriel’s surrep-

titious likeness of himself in his hand for a couple of minutes, and then quietly put it back in its cover. A careless observer might have supposed him perfectly unmoved by his discovery, and it would have taken an acute physiognomist to decipher clearly the meaning of the grey pallor which had all at once invaded his dark cheek and the tightening of his lips in lines and curves expressive of keenest suffering. But he could give himself no time in which to indulge such suffering, for a low growl of distant thunder warned him to proceed on his mission without delay. Decidedly a severe storm was close at hand, and it was becoming important to find Muriel and bring her down without a moment's delay.

At present the question was, where to find her? That she had been among the pines not long ago was clear; that she had not descended the hill again was equally so, for in that case he must have met her. She must then have gone further up, and he fancied he knew the direction she had taken. There was a half-ruined, deserted shepherd's hut—a "shieling" it would have been called in Scotland—about ten minutes' climb from the clump of pines, and he remembered having suggested to her that it would make a

picturesque sketch. No doubt, thinking to please him, she was drawing it in his absence. The thought made his eyes grow dim for a moment. Then he set his teeth firmly and started off up the steep hillside.

He had need for haste now. Every minute the thunder-mutterings were becoming more frequent and more distinct. Two or three big drops of rain, earnest of an impending deluge, fell on his face as he hurried upwards, and the rising wind swept by him with a strange weird moan which sounded like the voice of the ruling spirit of the storm calling his attendant daemons to the coming revel. They were answering his call, too, from every peak and valley round, and Wentworth pressed desperately on, with a sickening dread at his heart lest his surmise should prove incorrect, and Muriel be wandering in some lonely region of which he knew nothing. He could hardly forbear calling upon her as he went, though the next moment he was mocking at himself for his childish absurdity. At length the little deserted ruin was in sight; and he drew a long breath of relief, for there she was!

She was standing in the doorway, whither she had retreated for protection from the heavy raindrops which were gradually beginning to fall

more thickly, but when she saw Wentworth—a turn of the path hid him from view until he was within a few steps of the hut—she uttered a little exclamation of glad surprise and came out into the rain to meet him. “It is you!” she said, looking up at him with shy pleasure, while the swift colour mantled in her cheeks.

“Yes. I came to look for you when I heard from your maid that you were out. Didn’t you see the storm coming up? I was not sure where to find you, and I was afraid that possibly—You have given me a bad quarter of an hour, child.”

In her breathless delight at seeing Wentworth again, Muriel had not remarked anything unusual about his appearance. Now she perceived that he was pale and looked thoroughly disturbed.

“I am so sorry!” she said with genuine simple regret, though this new proof of his regard for her made her heart throb wildly for an instant. “It was very careless of me. I came up here to draw this—I thought I would do it to surprise you and prove to you that I had not been idle while you were away—and I got so interested that I never looked up till it began to rain. Then I thought it was too late to go back, so I took refuge— Ah!”

She broke off as a sudden vivid flash of lightning lit up the whole bleak mountain-side and was followed, with scarcely a second's interval, by a thunderclap repeated and re-echoed in the distance by a hundred peaks. The storm-fiends were fully awake and at work now.

Wentworth caught Muriel's arm and drew her into the rough shelter close at hand. "We are in for a pretty severe storm," he said; "it is lucky this place should be so near. The rain won't reach us here, and it is rather an opportunity for you to see a thunderstorm in the Alps. Unless you are too timid to enjoy it, that is to say; but I don't think you suffer from weak nerves."

"No, indeed. It is a grand opportunity for me, and I don't feel in the least bit afraid."

Certainly she did not seem afraid. She stood as close to the doorway as she could without getting actually soaked by the driving rain, and gazed out with a mixture of awe and delighted exhilaration at the impressive scene—but she showed not a symptom of fear. Perhaps she was too entirely happy for any other sensation to touch her just then.

As for Wentworth, he leant silently against the wall behind her, speaking only when she

turned her bright excited face towards him to bespeak his attention for some new wonder, or to ask a question concerning his adventures, and then his replies were brief and almost monosyllabic. His task was growing in difficulty with every minute that passed, and he asked himself vainly how he was to accomplish it; so he leant against the wall, rather impassive and uninterested to all appearance—but he could have counted his own heart-beats.

“Mr. Wentworth!” Muriel cried, breaking a silence that had lasted fully three minutes or more, “isn’t this storm like a splendid sky symphony? Now and then the deep-toned instruments that send out the thunder stop for a moment, and one hears the celestial oboes and clarionets in the wind and rain, till the whole orchestra joins in again with a crash. How red and angry that last flash was!”

“The storm is just overhead. Don’t stand so close to the doorway,” returned Wentworth abruptly.

“Indeed I am not afraid, and it is such a glorious sight! Just one minute longer, please, if I—— Oh!”

“Muriel! my darling!”

A second flash, more red and angry even than

its immediate predecessor, had rent the clouds as the girl spoke. It struck a solitary fir growing close by, severing one of the leading branches ; then, glancing off the bole of the tree, it seemed to dart in at the doorway and envelop Muriel's whole face and figure in a sheet of lurid flame. For an instant Wentworth beheld her, as he thought, actually on fire ; the next, as he sprang towards her, she put her hands over her eyes, and, with the cry which had interrupted her last words, staggered backwards and would have fallen had not Wentworth caught her in his arms.

“Thank Heaven, you are safe !” he cried, holding her close to him, and hardly knowing what he said in his madness. “Don’t tremble so, my darling, my beloved ! It was near, very near, but it has not touched you—you are safe, safe with me !”—tightening his embrace as if that could protect her from Heaven’s thunderbolts. “You are not so frightened now ?”

“No, not now,” Muriel sighed faintly. Half stunned by the recent shock, still partially paralysed by the terror with which she had seen herself for a moment brought face to face with Death in one of his most appalling forms, she did not attempt to resist the clasp of Wentworth’s

arms, and allowed her head to lie passive on his shoulder. She scarcely realized fully as yet what had happened ; she only felt a delicious consciousness of having escaped from infinite horror to infinite peace and security.

“ It was so close—O Heaven, so close ! ” Wentworth whispered, pressing his blanched lips passionately on the girl’s soft clustering hair, while above them the thunder clashed and reverberated till the frail tenement in which they stood seemed to shake, and the ground under their feet to tremble. “ But I have you safe, you are quite unhurt, and all is well.” Then, as a new fear seized him, he exclaimed, “ Your eyes give you no pain ; you can see quite well, cannot you ? Look up, darling, and look at me ! ”

Thus adjured, Muriel raised her head, which felt curiously heavy and confused. She looked up into Wentworth’s face, saw its tense expression of mute, strained anxiety, and watched this expression slowly give way to one of unutterable relief and indescribable tenderness. That last look brought her wholly to herself, and now she remembered all that had come to pass : the sudden awful fall of the lightning-stroke at her very feet, and that quick cry of alarm and dismay

behind her; next, one second of fearful darkness and bewilderment; and the end of it all, Wentworth's arms about her, Wentworth's eyes looking down into hers with love too deep for words. "I can see—quite well," was all she could find strength to utter; then she was fain to let her head sink back into its former resting-place again. For the moment the full revelation was almost more than she could bear.

"You are sure?" Wentworth asked. There was a perceptible alteration in his voice, though he did not loose his hold. Recollection had returned to him likewise.

"Quite sure," Muriel answered him. "But—it is strange!—I don't think I can stand; I feel as if the ground were slipping from under my feet."

He half guided, half carried her to a corner of the hut where she had thrown her own rug when she first took refuge from the impending storm, and arranged it so as to form a kind of seat for her. "You will be all right if you are perfectly quiet for a few minutes," he said, with a grave, self-restrained gentleness which the girl found infinitely touching. "You need not be alarmed, I think; probably it is only that you have had a kind of shock. Though the lightning

did not touch you, thank Heaven! yet it passed very close to you, and I am sure it is natural that you should feel shaken."

There was another though much more distant clap of thunder as Wentworth spoke, and Muriel started nervously.

Wentworth went on in the soothing tone he would have used to a frightened child: "There is really nothing to fear now; the thunder is rolling away. But it is still raining heavily, and we shall probably have to wait some little time before we can start. That will be all the better for you. Now put this on, and then lean back and don't try to talk."

He took off his outer coat as he spoke, and would have wrapped it round her. She made some kind of protest.

"You must do as I tell you, please," was his rejoinder, and Muriel submitted at once.

About half an hour passed in almost complete silence. Muriel, white and weak and weary, but with her heart full of unspeakable happiness, leant back obediently in her corner, and Wentworth stood in the doorway staring out. He kept his eyes away from the slight muffled-up figure close at hand, but Muriel did not distress herself in consequence. Her king and hero was

there to guard her, and what did she want more ? Was not this reticence, this very holding aloof on Wentworth's part, a beautiful proof of his tender respect and of his unwillingness to take any unmanly advantage of her weakness ? She lay back contentedly with closed eyes for the most part, feeling that she had never really loved him till that hour ; and he continued his dreary gaze at the slowly lessening rain, and fought out his dark conflict as best he might. Once only did he turn to look at Muriel, and then he found her stealing a shy glance at him which smote him to the very soul. For the girl's eyes were wet with tears of joy ; and there was a tender pride and trustful worship in them which it well-nigh broke his heart to read there. Verily, if Paul Wentworth had sinned, he suffered for his sins at that moment.

At length he was able to report that "the weather had cleared, and they had better start at once, if she felt equal to it." "She felt quite equal to anything," she responded with a sunny smile, and rose to her feet on the instant.

" You will keep that thing on till you get to the foot of the hill," Wentworth said decidedly, as Muriel was about to take off her borrowed wrappings. " I cannot have you run any risk

of a chill. Don't trouble to look for anything; I have all your sketching paraphernalia safe here—and, by the way, I found your small portfolio under the pines. You must have dropped it, I suppose."

Muriel blushed vividly, knowing what that portfolio contained.

"How stupid of me!" she exclaimed. "I am so much obliged to you for taking care of it; I had not missed it myself. One thing I did miss, and that was one of my gloves—I am in the way of losing all my property to-day, it seems—I wish you had found that too!"

Wentworth's hand moved mechanically to his breast-pocket, and was deliberately withdrawn again. Muriel's last remark he left unanswered.

They did not talk much on their homeward walk, for Muriel was still suffering from the shock she had experienced, and had enough to do to keep her feet in descending the rough mountain path; but Wentworth learnt from her that Professor and Mrs. Erskine were staying at Zurich on the invitation of the university authorities, and were not expected to return till the following evening. So when they reached the hotel he could only give his charge into the care of the anxious Janet, who was awaiting the girl's return in a fever of alarm.

"Try and sleep," Wentworth said, taking Muriel's hand for a moment in his own ice-cold fingers. "I shall come in to-morrow morning to hear how you are—don't go out till I have been. And now try and sleep—and forget it all."

It is proverbially easy to give good advice. Wentworth's advice was no doubt excellent; but it is possible that Muriel may have found some difficulty in following it.





CHAPTER XV.

THE FIRST DAY AND THE LAST.

“To-day is like the first day spent in heaven ;
All peace and trust—and yet all wonderment !”

WILLS’ *Faust*.

“ So one day more am I deified.
Who knows but the world may end to-night ? ”

R. BROWNING.

ONE part at least of Wentworth’s admirable counsel Muriel was able to carry into effect. Secure in her new-found happiness, and physically wearied out by all she had gone through, the girl slept as peacefully as a child, and awoke next morning full of health and gladness. When, soon after eleven o’clock, Wentworth knocked at the Erskines’ sitting-room door and was introduced by Janet, the face turned to greet him rivalled in freshness and sweetness the bunch of late roses he carried in his hand.

“ I need not ask how you are,” he said. “ A

glimpse of you is enough to confirm the highly satisfactory report Mrs. McDougall was so good as to give me two hours ago. I came in thus early to leave you free to go out, for I felt pretty certain you would remain obedient to my behests last night. Only I would not recommend a ten-mile walk for to-day."

Muriel laughed rather shyly. Taking into consideration all that had happened the day before, perhaps it is not altogether wonderful that she should have felt a little embarrassed. Wentworth's careless ease, as he stood smiling with his roses in his hand, was fairly incomprehensible to her. How could he take so lightly events which, from her point of view, seemed to have turned the world upside down?

This astonishing levity on Wentworth's part was neither assumed, nor yet the result of any radical change in his fixed intentions. He knew perfectly well that a terrible ordeal lay before him in the near future, but that did not prevent his recklessly enjoying the actual present. As to the regrettable past, that was already beyond redemption. There was no longer any possibility of evading the truth of the position into which he and Muriel had drifted—perhaps he no longer cared to do so. At any rate, why not

snatch a passing taste of sweetness out of this last day they were to spend together ?

In short, Wentworth was in a most dangerous mood—the mood of a man who knows that his fate is sealed already, and who, having nothing further to gain or lose by anything he may choose to do, surrenders himself for the time being to his unfettered inclinations. Muriel, of course, knew nothing of all this. Hers was simply the very natural embarrassment due to the curious relations in which she and Wentworth stood to one another.

“ It is very kind of you to come so early to take off the interdict,” she said, speaking fast to conceal her confusion. “ I am really very much obliged to you, for I am longing to get out into that splendid golden sunshine. I think September sunshine is always best of all. Janet, where’s my hat ? ”

“ In the next room it is, and I’ll get it for you, Miss Ferrars,” said the worthy woman, moving briskly off on her errand. Wentworth and Muriel were left alone.

“ Why don’t you take your roses ? ” he asked in his imperious way, coming a step nearer to her.

“ Are they for me ? ” Muriel put out both

hands to receive them. "Oh, thank you, thank you! It is nice to have roses in September, and these must be almost the last roses of summer." She gave a little involuntary sigh, which had more of satisfaction than regret in it, as she thought of all the summer had held for her, and buried her face in her flowers.

"Where shall I put them?" she asked doubtfully, looking up again and glancing round to find a receptacle for Wentworth's gift.

"Wear them," he answered briefly. "They will look well with your white gown, and that bunch is not too large to wear. I could only get you a tiny nosegay, do what I would. We have come to the end of our summer, you and I."

Wentworth's last words were so sadly spoken that they must needs have impressed Muriel with a sense of their sadness had she not been fully occupied in fastening the flowers to her dress. He watched the operation approvingly.

"Thank you," he said as she finished.

She looked up in surprise. "I could wish I were a painter just now," Wentworth went on, falling back to a little distance, the better to observe her as she stood in the full morning light. "I would ask you to sit to me for a study of Tennyson's *Maud* coming out into the garden

at daybreak to meet her lover—a rose among the roses."

The comparison his last words suggested was not inapt. Never yet had Muriel looked as fair as she did then, standing before Wentworth with her head a little bent, a soft flush on her cheeks, and her downcast lids barely veiling the light in her happy eyes. Her face had all the sunny sweetness of a child's, ennobled and glorified by a womanly depth and tenderness of expression wholly new to its pure outlines. The one thing wanting hitherto to her beauty had been added—the sleeping soul in her face had awakened at the mysterious touch of the strongest feeling of which our human nature is capable. Seeing her thus, Wentworth was smitten with sudden compunction, perhaps.

"I should like this to be a day of roses in every sense," he said in a different tone. "I have," he continued with a palpable effort, speaking rapidly and breathlessly, "something very serious about which to talk to you, something of which I ought perhaps to have spoken to you before. I must speak of it before I go, and I am going back to England the day after to-morrow. Only—if you are willing, that is to say—I would rather not speak of it to-day. There is to-

morrow for . . . these serious things: may we not enjoy to-day in our old fashion? Shall I speak now, or wait till to-morrow?"

Of course she misinterpreted him: how should she have done otherwise? What serious topic could he have to speak about save one? What subject save one was likely to throw him into such a state of uncontrollable agitation? He, pursuing the current of his own harassing thoughts, did not realize the impression which his words were likely to convey to the mind of his listener. But she fancied she understood him perfectly, and it was hardly likely that she would press him to make immediately an avowal which he himself seemed anxious to postpone a little longer. She thought it rather odd on his part to have put such a decision upon her.

"Oh no, no! please not!" she replied eagerly. "I mean I would rather you did not speak now. I would rather wait until to-morrow; much, much rather. Please don't tell me anything to-day!"

Wentworth's face grew a shade less deathlike as Muriel spoke, and just then Janet returned with the hat.

"Where have you been all this time, Janet?"

Muriel inquired volubly, darting up to the old Scotchwoman. "I was wondering what had become of you; one would think you had been making the hat," she complained with well-feigned displeasure. Inwardly she was thinking: "Supposing I had let him speak, and this foolish Janet had arrived in the midst of it all!"

"Indeed but I've been trimming it, Miss Ferrars, and that's the simple truth," returned Janet, her wrath barely tempered in its outward expression by the recollection that she stood in the presence of Mr. Wentworth, whom she held in considerable awe. "Have you clean forgot that you were out in the rain yestreen? and though the trimming's so to speak but a wee scrap of ribbon, it needna be soiled for a' that." She pointed indignantly to the fresh white ribbon she had knotted round the girl's straw boating-hat.

"I am sure I beg your pardon, Janet," said Muriel penitently. "I am really very much obliged to you for taking so much trouble about my hat; and now give it me, please, for I think it is a shame to stay in any longer."

Janet complied, and withdrew in some offence.

Wentworth turned to go. "I have a few

hours' work to do," he said, "and then my holiday task will be completed. By four o'clock it will be cool and pleasant on the water, if you would like to go out in the boat. We might row across to that little glen where I saw you first, and get back before dark. Will you go?"

He was pledged to keep silence; he had himself suggested that for this one day longer matters should remain on their old friendly footing. There could therefore be no harm in doing what she had often done before. "Yes," Muriel replied softly. "I should like to go."

"Very well; I will come and look for you in the garden at four o'clock. Good-bye till then." He walked to the door, then suddenly turned upon her abruptly, almost defiantly. "Recollect," he said sharply, "that the decision rested with you. You made your own choice. If you had desired it, I would have spoken to-day."

This parting speech puzzled Muriel, it is true, but any misgivings it might have aroused were quickly silenced by the reflection that it had probably been inspired by a fear lest she should suppose him reluctant to utter those decisive words he had surely made up his mind to speak. She was in no hurry to hear them. The know-

ledge she possessed already was quite enough for her, and would be quite enough for a long time to come. She was confident that Wentworth loved her, and in this confidence she was satisfied. She had never yet carried her dreams of the future far enough to imagine herself his wife.

Wentworth was punctual to his tryst. It was barely four o'clock when he and Muriel pushed off from the little landing-place into the green gleaming water on which the sunbeams were dancing merrily. It was a brilliant September afternoon, bright, but not hot. A fresh inspiring breeze just ruffled the glittering surface of the lake into tiny crisp wavelets, and blew Muriel's soft hair about her face in little mutinous curls and tendrils. The lights and shadows on the bright expanse of water were not more shifting than those which played over her fair mobile countenance. Wentworth sat opposite her, rowing steadily, and mentally engraving the sweet picture on his memory meanwhile. For was it not the last time?

"I feel like a boy out of school," he said presently. "I have nothing for this one evening to do but to enjoy. My last proofs went off to the publisher's to-day."

"The very last?" queried the girl, bending forward with eager interest. "Then the book is nearly through the press, and soon, very soon, it will be out now, will it not?"

"In two or three weeks," Wentworth answered, smiling at her eagerness. "Remember, you are pledged to read it through."

Muriel laughed. "I don't expect to find it such very dull reading," she rejoined confidently. "And I shall be so interested to see what the papers and reviews say of it."

"I can tell you beforehand what some of them will say. The organs of the progressive party—the Radical journals and the magazines whose editors pride themselves on the breadth and catholicity of their sympathies—will applaud 'this praiseworthy attempt on the part of a professional man to look outside the bounds of his calling and identify himself with the general current of modern thought.' The Conservative newspapers and periodicals, on the other hand, will amuse themselves and their readers by filling their columns with smart new versions of the uncivil old proverb, 'Cobbler, stick to thy last.' And finally the society papers will exclaim with epigrammatic neatness, 'Is Saul also among the prophets? and do we behold Paul

Wentworth turned philanthropist and social reformer ? ”

“ You don’t seem greatly dismayed at the prospect of these criticisms,” Muriel said.

“ Not a whit. Happily for myself, I am a tolerably thick-skinned individual. I wrote the book partly for my own amusement, partly to ventilate some ideas on the condition of the labouring population which I thought might possibly be useful. There is an immense amount of rubbish talked by well-meaning enthusiasts nowadays on these matters—men who have no real knowledge whatever of the subject they discuss. Now, I got my facts on such indisputably reliable authority, and tested them so carefully myself, that I may almost say I learnt them at first hand; and as for my ideas, they have the merit of common sense, if no other.”

“ I think the book ought to do a great deal of good,” said Muriel warmly, “ and you may find the critics more honest and appreciative, and less stereotyped in their judgment than you expect.”

Wentworth shook his head. “ Your indignation is easily roused on behalf of your friends. What do you say to this little story ? A brother of mine, a capital fellow who spends all his time

toiling and slaving among those wretched East Enders whenever he can get away from his work at Oxford, got me to go down one evening and deliver a lecture on some scientific subject to three or four hundred rough lads and young men from the docks. I believe he persuaded me to do this quite as much for my own moral benefit as for the intellectual improvement of these promising youths—I fancy he thought the sight might be good for me. Well, I went; and the unwashed gentlemen and I happened to hit it off admirably. Perhaps they were foolishly demonstrative in expressing their approbation of my poor efforts, not being quite civilized enough to have attained to the *nil admirari* of good society—nothing more likely. On the following Monday the *Piccadilly Gazette* had a burlesque version of the whole very simple affair—I won't trouble you with the details, but some of them would have fully justified an action for libel—and *Town Talk* published an article darkly insinuating that I was secretly canvassing the constituency with a view to ousting the sitting member—a political ally and personal friend of my own—at the next general election!"

"After that," said Muriel, her eyes on fire with indignation, "I see nothing for it but to

suspect the truth of everything one reads. I see you are right, Mr. Wentworth; the only right way must be to steel yourself against such things, and pass them by as too contemptible for notice. But speaking of the general election, I suppose there will be another soon. How I wish you were in Parliament!"

Wentworth looked at her in considerable amusement. "Why?" he asked.

"My uncle tells me every one says you are so well fitted to sit there," Muriel answered, colouring at her own audacity. "He thinks you ought to be there himself."

"And you? What do you think?"

"I? I have had a fancy about it, certainly. The first time I saw you I imagined you were a Cabinet Minister."

Wentworth's eyes flashed, but he went on talking quite composedly.

"I am afraid you must have been terribly disappointed when you discovered your mistake! Well, if ever I do find myself within the walls of St. Stephen's, I mean to do something more than record silent votes. But I don't know if that day will ever come, though perhaps it may please you to know that it was an old boyish ambition of mine to sit on the green benches and give laws to the empire."

"I am so glad!" she responded quickly. "Thank you for telling me that."

"Then your ideal life is the life of a public man? And my present profession: do you condemn it utterly?"

"No, indeed. Only—"

"Only you consider it a loftier occupation to make the national laws, than to assist in enforcing them when made, eh? I think that may fairly be considered a moot point in these days. Pull the right-hand string! hard! harder yet, please! or you will get splashed by the paddles of this steamer."

* * * * *

In September the great stream of tourists which pours into Switzerland during the two preceding months begins to slacken and dwindle, and consequently there was plenty of room on the decks of the lake steamer which was bearing down in the direction of the Mythen landing-stage. The wide open space near and around the wheel was occupied only by two persons, a gentleman and a lady—English both, as might be seen at a glance, and as evidently husband and wife.

The former—Sir John Clavering of Newhayre, in the county of Holmshire, Bart., to give him his full style and title—was a man of middle

height whose age might be fixed anywhere on the wrong side of sixty. He had plain harsh features, thin grizzled hair very carefully disposed about his partially bald head, a slightly crabbed expression of countenance, and a short gruff manner of speaking which made him very formidable to shy or nervous acquaintances. His whole individuality as reflected in his outward appearance was—to borrow a graphic epithet of Carlyle's—‘saw-dustish;’ which may be accounted for by the fact that he had been for thirty years an Oxford tutor when, by the premature death of a nephew, he suddenly found himself a country gentleman of considerable property and a baronet to boot. The traditions and habits of his old life clung to him persistently in his new circumstances, and among his bullocks and mangolds or his coverts and trout-streams—sitting with his fellow-magistrates on a poaching case or proposing the Queen's health at a Conservative dinner—he was still, and always would be the university don.

His wife, a vivacious little woman whom he had married late in life, and who was at least fifteen years his junior, was no more of a *grande dame* than he of a *grand seigneur*. She liked her position very much, and enjoyed it frankly

and openly. Possessed of a large amount of natural shrewdness unsupplemented by any but the most superficial education, she was always making astonishing mistakes, and then laughing at them herself. Many women with only half her innate cleverness and without an additional shred of information yet made a better figure in the world than she, simply because they thought before they spoke. Now, this was what Susan Clavering never did, and as she added to her other qualities a great fondness for good-natured intermeddling in other people's affairs, it may easily be imagined that the atmosphere in which she lived was usually kept at a brisk heat. Otherwise she was merely a kind-hearted woman with an immense capacity for taking trouble, and a knack of deriving pleasure from everything that came in her way. She was enjoying herself now, standing on the deck of the steamer and chattering uninterruptedly to her husband, in no wise discouraged by the gruff monosyllables which were all he vouchsafed in answer to her airy remarks.

“This part of the lake is quite the loveliest, I think,” she said. “I am so glad we are going to stay a night here instead of at Lucerne—Lucerne’s so townified.”

A grunting sound from Sir John, which might be understood to refer to the superior comfort of the Lucerne hotels.

“But the Mythical Hotel—yes, John, I know that’s not the right word, but I can’t pronounce that, so I call it Mythical; it does as well, and it’s a legendary place altogether, you know, and legends and myths are much the same thing;—let me see, what were we talking about? Oh, the hotel! Well, it’s very nice and comfortable; Lucy Ferrars read me one of Muriel’s letters, and she gave quite a charming account of it. Dear little Muriel! I wonder if she’s as pretty as ever? I haven’t seen her now for nearly five months.”

Grunt again; this time signifying a hope that Muriel’s recommendation might prove a trustworthy one.

“Oh yes, she was always so truthful!” Lady Clavering rattled on. “Sincere, transparent—just like her poor mother. She’ll be so pleased at our looking in upon her, I know. I am so grateful to you for stopping, dear John.”

“Dear John” did not appear much mollified by this expression of thankfulness.

“And you’ll enjoy a chat with your old friend Erskine,” added his wife encouragingly, “as much

as I shall enjoy one with Isabel. Dear good creature, Isabel, only with so little head. How pretty that boat looks dancing over the waves! There's a girl in white sitting in the stern—I wonder if it could be— Why, it is Muriel herself! I shall wave my handkerchief and try to make her see us. I wish it was proper to make that cry people give when they're lost in the bush—a coo-ee, you know—but I suppose it would hardly do."

The lively lady ran to the side of the steamer and made frantic signals, but as Muriel was looking in the opposite direction, it is perhaps not surprising that her greetings should have met with no response. She turned back discomfited.

"Muriel doesn't see us. What a pity! I wish I knew who was with her. It's a man; and it's not Professor Erskine, for he hasn't got red hair or a beard. It would be just like Isabel to send her out with some pet pupil of the Professor's, and no chaperone at all. Lend me your glass, John! Quick!"

Sir John complied with rather more alacrity than was usual with him, and his energetic help-mate had the glass out of its case and adjusted to the right focus in the twinkling of an eye. She looked through it once, twice, thrice, posi-

tively without uttering a word ; then she let her hand fall, and showed a genuinely discomposed countenance.

“ Isabel Erskine must have taken leave of her senses ! ” she exclaimed.

“ What’s the matter ? ” inquired Sir John.

“ I think it’s Providence that brought us here,” Lady Clavering answered solemnly. “ There’s Muriel Ferrars out in a boat, and not a soul with her but that one man ; and who do you think the man is ? I’m not mistaken, John ; he’s a man there’s no mistaking, and I saw him as plainly as I see you now. It’s *Paul Wentworth !* ”

* * * * *

Wentworth and Muriel landed on the opposite shore, and strolled along it rather silently. From widely different causes both were too preoccupied to talk freely ; both were reluctant to speak only of indifferent subjects, yet on the subjects that filled their minds the lips of both were sealed. When they reached the little glen, the entrance of which had been the scene of their earliest meeting, they instinctively stopped, as if by mutual consent.

“ This is where I first saw you . . . Muriel,” Wentworth said. It was only after a perceptible

pause that he added the last word to his sentence, for it was the first time he had ever deliberately thus addressed the girl.

“Yes, I remember,” she answered softly.

“Just here it was; and to-morrow it will be three weeks since that day,” Wentworth went on.

Muriel made no reply this time. “Three weeks!” she thought to herself. “No more than that?” He answered her as if she had spoken.

“It seems more like three years, doesn’t it? or three ages? One may live through half a lifetime in a few hours, child, or exist for twenty years without really living for an hour. We have lived these three weeks of ours and been happy in them; whatever is to come in the future, nothing can deprive us of that.”

Again Muriel made no response. It was indeed sweet that in his reminiscences of the past he should speak of her as indissolubly linked with himself; nevertheless, his troubled manner frightened her a little.

“It is strange how things come about,” Wentworth said musingly. “I dropped a letter that day, and went back to look for it, else I might never have known you. Perhaps it would have been better so, for you at least. I regret nothing,

as far as I am concerned—I have had my three weeks of life."

"What would have become of me that night if you had not found me?" Muriel questioned, trying, after her old fashion, to lead the conversation into a safer and less emotional channel. But it was no Jack Arlingham, simple and easily discomfited, with whom she now had to deal. "I might have had to spend eight or nine hours here in the dark by myself, if you had not providentially appeared."

"Do you think Providence had much to do with the matter?" Wentworth returned, knitting his brows. He did not speak sneeringly, but rather with a bitter earnestness in his tone. "However, that is a question we need not inquire into. Wouldn't you like to explore your glen once more to-day? I call it yours, you see. You have set your impress upon it; I think it is here, where I first met you, that I shall always picture you to myself in years to come. Shall we walk a little way up? There is time, if you would like to go."

"No, I think not," Muriel replied with an involuntary shiver. "It looks so dark and gloomy to-day. I would rather remember it as I saw it last."

The aspect of the place was indeed greatly changed. The little stream which ran through the ravine, no longer clear and silvery, but dark and muddy, had been swollen by the late rains to the dimensions of a torrent. The low autumn sun could not penetrate the darkness created by the overhanging trees, the leaves of which were already beginning to show signs of decay; there was a lack of light, warmth, beauty—of everything, in short, which had made the spot so attractive three short weeks before.

“You are thinking how quickly it has been transformed,” Wentworth said, as he watched his companion’s face; “but three weeks can make a vast difference, as you see. I told you our summer was over.”

“Don’t say that,” Muriel answered cheerfully. “See how beautiful everything looks, except this glen! There is sunshine everywhere else.”

“Yes, from a sun that is just going down,” Wentworth rejoined meaningly. “Well, we will go back into the sunshine while it lasts.”

And while the sunshine lasted he was content to enjoy it. He uttered no further saying prophetic of coming trouble, and seemed to have abandoned himself completely to the enchantment of the moment. He protracted the brief

voyage by every means in his power far beyond its necessary limit in time, for he was intent on wringing out of the few minutes remaining to him all the sweetness they contained. The sun set in tranquil September glory in the west; overhead the sky faded from blue to pearly gray, and then deepened again into the darker hue of twilight; the stars began to twinkle out, first as mere points of pale white radiance, then silver-shining, at length golden-bright—finally the week-old moon rose fully above the horizon and cast her mantle of witching light and shade over the scene. She was high in heaven when Wentworth made fast the boat in the boat-house, and Muriel put her hand in his for a parting good-night.

He held it fast, looking at her. "You know," he said, "that I am going away the day after to-morrow?"

"I know. You told me." She did not say, "I am sorry." Nothing could come between them now, she was well persuaded; and having this confidence, it was impossible for her to feel sorry about anything.

"I have something to tell you before I go, something which it is needful for you to know. I meant to have told it you long ago, but from

time to time I put it off. There can be no further putting off now. Let me see you to-morrow as early as possible, and try to be as lenient in your thoughts towards me as you can. I have been mad, I believe, but it was partly for your sake that I kept silence of late. You seemed so happy—try to forgive me."

Wentworth's voice shook with emotion, and there was a depth of pathetic entreaty in his last words which bewildered Muriel even more than the words themselves. She looked up and saw his face pale and quivering in the moonlight, and an intense longing to reassure and comfort him took possession of her. She answered quickly—

"I am sure you have done what is right. I shall be ready to hear whatever you wish to say to me; but I am not anxious to know anything. I am quite content now."

Every word Muriel spoke was like a sharp stab to Wentworth. "Because you don't understand!" he cried. "Things are so different from what you suppose. You live in a world of your own; you know nothing of life—or of love either. You think they are beautiful mysteries, but you will discover more sorrow than beauty in them when you find out what they really

mean. Until to-day you have been only playing with your own ideas and fancies. To-morrow you will have to face reality."

She was not a whit daunted by his words, sorely as they perplexed her. Did he hint that life would be less sunny than she had pictured it —that there was trouble in store for the future? What matter, since she belonged to him? These things would have to be faced, he said? Yes, with her hand in his! No matter for this either.

She looked up at him again. "I am not afraid!" she answered with a radiant smile, such a smile as Wentworth had never seen before on the face of any human being, and which after that night he never saw again on Muriel's. So full was it of pure gladness, so eloquent of unswerving trust in him, that he positively quailed before the girl in shame for a moment. Instinctively he let go her hand.

"Good night," she said, and was turning from him. Her action roused him from his awe-struck silence and stupefaction.

"Before you go," he said, arresting her, "tell me one thing. Have you been happy to-night?" He laid a hand on each of her shoulders, holding her before him like a child, while his look seemed trying to read her very soul.

"It has been a lovely evening," she answered evasively, "and I have enjoyed it—more than I can tell."

"Are you, too, determined to put me off with mere empty phrases when it comes to the point?" Wentworth asked with passionate scorn. "Enjoyed it! What do such words mean between you and me, Muriel? Let us have done with shams and pretences; don't cheat me of the truth for this once. I have been exquisitely, supremely happy to-night—tell me that you have been happy too, my darling!"

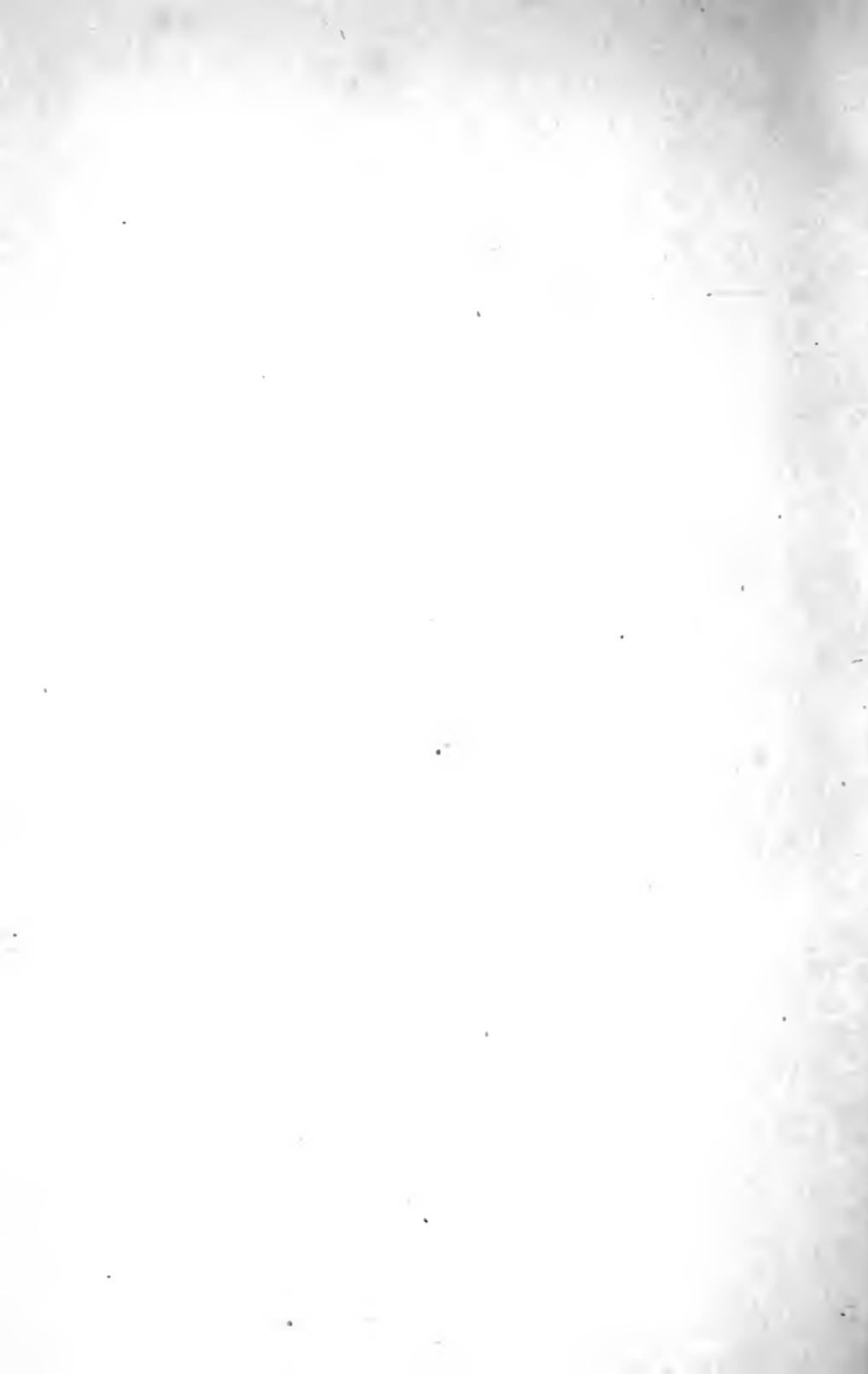
He was breaking the morning's compact, in the spirit if not in the letter, but she could not resist his pleading voice and look. She freed herself suddenly from his detaining grasp. "I think," she answered hurriedly, "that if I were to say I was happy, I should not be telling you the half." Her eyes filled all at once with tears. "It is so much more, so much more—you don't know——"

She was gone before the broken words had well left her lips. He made an instinctive movement to follow her, but checked it by a desperate effort of will, and remained standing, as he had stood three weeks earlier, while her light figure gradually disappeared into the dusky shadow of

the path leading upward through the garden. Did he think of the resolution so carelessly made —so quickly forgotten? If not on the hushed evening air, yet surely in the recesses of the man's soul, a still small voice was speaking, asking in accents too clear to be silenced by all the hidden tumult of passion and pain, "*What is this that thou hast done?*"

END OF VOL. I.















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